



The Executioner and Her Way of Life

◆◆ WHITEOUT ◆◆



2

Mato Sato



ILLUSTRATION BY
nilitsu

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life



Mato Sato

ILLUSTRATION BY
nilitsu



Prologue

Chapter 1: Port City Libelle

Interlude

Chapter 2: No One Knows Where the Fog Goes

Interlude

Chapter 3: Scattered Sparks at the Evening Ball

Chapter 4: Maiden Dried from Dew

Chapter 5: Maiden Bathed in Blood

Epilogue

CONTENTS







The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life

◆◆◆ WHITEOUT ◆◆◆

2

Mato Sato



ILLUSTRATION BY

nilitsu


NEW YORK

Copyright

The Executioner and Her Way of Life 2

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY JENNY MCKEON ❖ COVER ART BY NILITSU

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHU (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol.2

-WHITEOUT—

Copyright © 2019 Mato Sato

Illustrations copyright © 2019 nilitsu

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by SB Creative Corp This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2021 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com ❖ facebook.com/yenpress ❖ twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com ❖ instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: August 2021

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Sato, Mato, author.
| nilitsu, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.

Title: The executioner and her way of life / Mato Sato ; illustration by nilitsu
; translation by Jenny McKeon.

Other titles: Shokei shoujo no ikiru michi. English Description: First Yen On
edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021— Identifiers: LCCN 2020054675 | ISBN
9781975319694 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319717 (v. 2 ; trade
paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S26496 Ex 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020054675>

ISBNs: 978-1-97531971-7 (paperback) 978-1-9753-1972-4 (ebook)

E3-20210608-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: Port City Libelle](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter 2: No One Knows Where the Fog Goes](#)

[Interlude](#)

[Chapter 3: Scattered Sparks at the Evening Ball](#)

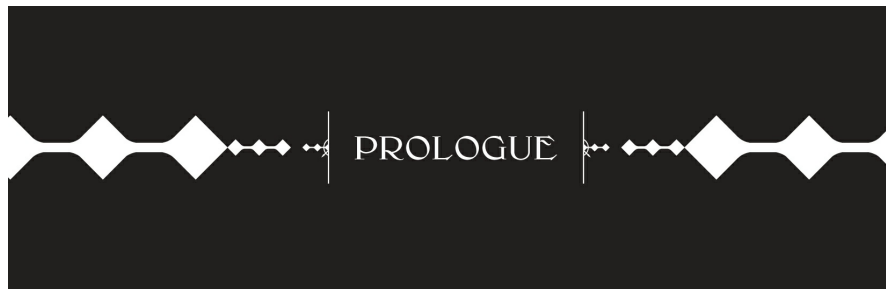
[Chapter 4: Maiden Dried from Dew](#)

[Chapter 5: Maiden Bathed in Blood](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



As far as the eye could see, the world was white—pure white.

It settled over the area, more pristine than morning mist, more tranquil than the sea of clouds fanned around the highest mountain peak.

Fog.

Amid its soft whiteness, which seemed impossible to touch, stood one little girl.

As the fog spread out with her at the center, covering everything with its haze, she slowly stretched her hand out.

Vapor coiled around it, clinging to her, heavier than lead and hindering her movements.

It was an unnatural amount of mass for fog. Even the tiny movement of raising her arm was enough to cause the condensation to mold itself to her body. When she tried to move anyway, it pressed down even harder until the small girl's fragile arm broke with a snap.

"Mm..."

Though her arm had been twisted out of shape, she gave a little sigh of disappointment, evidently unbothered by the pain. She lifted her chin, looking toward the noises from her surroundings.

In the fog, she could barely make out the fingertips at the end of her broken arm. While she couldn't depend on her eyes to guide her, she could listen to the unpleasant sounds that reached her ears.

At any moment, there was the eerie chattering of teeth, shrieks sounding like the mangled cries of birds and wild animals, flesh crashing into flesh, and dying screams. The inability to see anything but white fog made the sounds all the more unsettling.

And it wasn't just her ears, either. Her body itself was exposed to a disquieting sensation. Drops of liquid poured down on her, soaking her skin.

It felt like rain, but it wasn't.

Showering her was fresh blood.

Invisible in the fog, a battle was unfolding: combatants devouring, killing, crushing one another, rending flesh, tearing at one another's spirits, swallowing their very souls.

This rain of blood striving to stain the white space would not last long. Chunks of flesh fell with a *splat*, and they would quickly be slurped up and swallowed by something unseen.

"Mm, mm, mmm..."

She used her ears, skin, nose, tongue, and everything but her obscured vision to sense her surroundings as she began to hum.

"Mm, mm-mm-mm, mm, mm..."

The little girl—so out of place in this bizarre location—was humming a tune. She sang the melody with nothing but wordless notes, no lyrics to match the song.

As she dangled her legs in the air, the surface below her seemed to shift in response to the song. It moved forward, backward, left, right, and even up and down. The very ground was altering.

"Mm-mm-mm-mm-mm."

Something landed with a wet *splat* right next to the girl.

An entire armful's worth of meat. *Ah*, she thought, realizing that something above her must have gotten torn apart by something else. Lumps of bloody flesh, noticeably larger than usual, began to fall around her.

Within moments, small monsters scuttled closer to devour the meat. In the constant eat-or-be-eaten battle, dead monster meat was the perfect fodder. One of the creatures that had come to scavenge for meat set its sights on the little girl, who was innocently humming her tune.

A bird-shaped monster, bigger than a human being. It assumed the smaller figure was defenseless prey and thrust its long beak down to impale her.

The little girl paid it no mind. There was no need for her to do anything.

“Mm, mm-mm, mm, mm, mm...”

The surface below her feet lurched upward.

What the girl was actually standing on was a gigantic beast. It would be difficult to measure even its width, let alone its full length. The monster, as big as a living island, opened its maw.

Its mouth was bristling with spikelike teeth. Even the smallest tooth was larger than an adult human being. The bird monster that had swooped down to attack was swallowed like a tiny fish into the mouth of a whale. It crashed onto one of the teeth, skewered to death.

When the large monster moved, the surrounding battle sped up. Blood gushed like fountains. Broken teeth and pieces of flesh piled high. Soon, there was so much mashed-up sinew that it spread before her like the ocean.

But none of it mattered to the little girl.

“Mm, mm-mm-mm-mm.”

Bloody rain. Clots of flesh. Dispersing spirits. Scattered souls. Even the primary color of red that tried to dye the world in chaos and despair was painted over by the white fog. And through it all, the girl paid no attention to any of it as she hummed a tune.

It was an ordinary day for her, until the next moment.

“.....Mm?” She suddenly stopped her song and blinked rapidly.

CREAK went a loud noise.

Of course, the sounds of things breaking were perfectly usual. After all, this was a battlefield of cannibalism and bloodshed.

But this sound was different.

It wasn't living flesh being torn, or bones breaking, or souls snapping. It was a strange sound, as if the world itself had bent.

What was it? She tilted her head and strained her ears, but nothing else was out of the ordinary. All she could hear was the usual sounds of living things being crushed and dying. Nothing but the typical fights and gruesome battles to devour one another.

She was about to dismiss it as her imagination when it happened again.

There was another *CREAK*, as if from the fog itself. And if it happened twice, surely it would happen a third time. As the girl waited warily, the grating sound repeated, albeit in long intervals.

This haze was made as a nearly impenetrable barrier, as far as things trying to escape from inside. It, however, was weak to pressure from the outside.

Though this white fog that imprisoned the little girl was incredibly close to perfect in accomplishing its goal, it wasn't completely prepared for every situation imaginable.

The fog creaked again. Something was happening in the outside world. The structure of the mist was beginning to bend under external pressure.

For the first time in a millennium, it had begun to change.

"Mm...mm, mm!" She tried to say something, but what escaped her mouth failed to form words.

That was to be expected.

She, too, had been here for the last millennium. A thousand years with no one to talk to was more than enough to deprive her of speech. The voice—faintly familiar—stirred the vocabulary that lay somewhere deep in her memories, but all she could produce was an incomprehensible cry.

"Mmm..."

She had been here for so long. Long enough that she had lost all sense of time entirely.

The girl had been bored to death. Even after she'd ruined lands, devoured islands, drank up the ocean, and fought to the death. Even after she'd used up all her memories, and nothing was left in the fog. All there was to do was eat or be eaten.

That was about to change.

“Mm! Mm!”

The fog creaked once again. Finally, the bend was breaking past its limits. A small hole opened in the haze. It was only big enough for her little finger, but it was still a hole that led outside.

A way out.

She could leave this place. Escape from the fog.

But... What kind of place was outside, exactly?

She felt like there was something out there...something that she, personally, was supposed to do.

Wasn't there?

“Mm...”

She couldn't remember. How could she, after all this time?

Instead, the instincts that guided the girl were unconnected to her memories. There were two unwritten rules that motivated her now.

Bring chaos to this world.

Bring carnage to this planet.

“Mm!” The girl reached out her little finger. “Mmm, mm-mm-mm, mm-mm-mm, mm-mm-mm.”

Unable to remember anything, she kept on singing a song that she somehow still knew.

A pinky promise. Even if there were few in this world who knew of it, any Japanese child would recognize this vow.

At the same time, her eyes glowed red with Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—

This was a place once known as the Alliance of Southern Islands. Their ancient civilization was at the height of prosperity when it was destroyed by the Four Major Human Errors; as a result, the entire area had been covered in fog for

more than a thousand years.

Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—

The Pure Concept that existed alongside countless monsters. The Otherworlder who had recklessly wielded the title of Devourer of Worlds. The Human Error brought about by the Pure Concept of *Evil* was deemed unfit to exist and sealed away in the fog.

The site of the Human Error, invisible in the fog, was known and feared as Pandemonium. A territory of *Evil*, full of monsters and forbidden to humans.

Invoke [Pinky Promise, Little Miss Liar]

It was there that this single conjuring was invoked.



Port City Libelle

The sun sat on its throne in the clear sky, its rays baking the earth.

These sunbeams flooded the ruins. Plants had withered, and water was so scant that even the air itself felt dry. Each gust of wind sent sand spinning into the air. It was clear at a glance that this gray-brown wasteland, extending as far as the eye could see, would be a difficult place for any living thing to call home.

This desolate terrain was the region known as the Wild Frontier.

There was not much of interest in sight. Dust clouds drifted across the dried-up land. It was a harsh environment that few people dared to tread; an arid, ruinous wasteland that separated one sheltered country from another.

Only one road led through it, climbing up a small hill. It could hardly be called well-maintained—if anything, it was such a sad excuse for a road that it was almost as if the ground had just been worn down by chance.

Two girls were walking down this long path.

One was a mature-looking young woman with lovely features. A large, black ribbon secured her hair in a stylish ponytail, and she wore the indigo robes of a priestess. The deep slit in the right side of her skirt revealed stunning long legs in knee-high laced boots.

Her footsteps were swift and sure. This young woman seemed well accustomed to travel and showed no signs of exhaustion.

The other girl had a more childlike face.

Her black hair seemed to tangle around her shoulders. At a glance, her chest was one of her more prominent features, even completely covered by her clothes. Her steps were a bit unsteady. Noticing that exhaustion was wearing her down, the other girl shortened her stride to match her companion's pace.

The two girls were wearing matching cloaks, partly to protect them from the

sun. As they walked down the path in silence, one of the girls mumbled to herself.

“My soul’s too worn out to go on...”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be able to complain about it.” The more mature-looking young woman shot down the girl with the baby face.

This was far from the first or second time she had made such a declaration. In fact, she’d complained countless times over the course of the journey thus far. The cold response seemed to imply it wasn’t worth taking her moaning seriously anymore.

The baby-faced girl wasn’t discouraged in the least, however.

“Hee-hee, maybe you’re right, Menou. If I really couldn’t go on, I guess I wouldn’t have enough energy to complain, either. Do you wanna know why I still have a little energy in spite of this awful journey?”

“Perhaps those humps on your chest store enough moisture to keep you hydrated...?”

“Of course not!”

The response from the girl called Menou clearly indicated that she didn’t care to waste energy thinking about the answer. The other girl flailed her fists indignantly at Menou’s rudeness and disinterest.

“Menou, you perv! Reserve those types of comments until we’re at the next stage of our relationship!”

“I’m sorry, Akari. I won’t say that ever again.” Menou’s expression turned serious. She bowed immediately. “I sincerely apologize. I went too far this time. Could you please refrain from spouting that sort of nonsense in the future?”

“Aww... Why’re you being so cold?”

For some reason, Menou’s apology was met with displeasure.

The girl called Akari sounded genuinely upset as she pressed closer to Menou.

“You don’t want to deepen your relationship with me, Menou? You can be so mean!”

“Is it impossible for you to walk in silence...?” Menou looked up at the sky, lamenting that talking to her traveling companion was like talking to a brick wall.

The journey across borders by way of this pilgrimage route was a long and arduous one.

On this continent, virtually every border was surrounded by the Wild Frontier. The rugged terrain could only be traversed by foot through this unforgiving path. As if spending time in undeveloped territory wasn’t difficult enough, the fact that it was no-man’s-land meant there were outlaws, too. On top of that, wild animals, monsters of all kinds, and conjured soldiers from the eastern Wild Frontier could attack at any moment.

Travelers walked on foot amid these threats.

They would walk the path in the morning and reach a lodging area in the afternoon. There, they could tend to their belongings, wash their clothes, buy supplies, and otherwise prepare for the next day, and go to bed as soon as the sun set. Then they would wake up at dawn the next morning and do it all over again.

On the pilgrimage route, all aspects of life revolved around walking.

On all but the worst parts of the road, they would travel even in the rain, pressing ever forward. This simple lifestyle—in which everything was devoted to moving ahead—was said to purge anything superficial from the soul and spirit. That was why traversing the Wild Frontier was considered a pilgrimage and had a spiritual significance to priestesses.

Two weeks had passed on a journey that even the toughest priestess would consider a challenge, but the girl next to Menou was as chatty as ever, much to Menou’s surprise.

“Hey, Menou? Hey! Can you hear me? It hurts when you give me the cold shoulder, you know! Haven’t you ever heard the saying ‘speech is silver, silence is golden’? It means that being quiet is important, but there’s value in talking, too. In conclusion, chatting is fun!”

“Fine, fine. I just have to hear you out, right? Once you’re done, will you

please be quiet?” Menou finally caved when Akari dragged out ancient wisdom to back up her baseless argument. Reluctantly, she asked the question Akari wanted to hear. “Well? Why do you still have energy to go on?”

Akari grinned and puffed out her chest proudly as if Menou had just happened to stumble on the perfect question. “It’s because having you next to me is like an oasis for my soul, obviously!”

“I swear...” Menou sighed wearily at the answer, which was somehow even sillier than she’d expected.

It was impossible to tell from the way Akari was so attached to Menou, but the two of them had only known each other for about three weeks. From the moment they first met, Akari was strangely fond of Menou, but she’d only gotten more persistent about it over the past few weeks. At this point, Menou was beginning to give up on treating Akari like a guest.

“Can’t you find a way to be more self-sufficient? When I’m with you, it feels like... I don’t know, like you’re absorbing all my energy or something.”

“Sorry, no can do. I need Vitamin Menou to live, and the only way I can get it is from you! Otherwise, I’ll wither away!”

“I seriously doubt that... You lived perfectly fine for sixteen years before you met me, didn’t you?”

“I no longer have any recollection of my past sixteen years.”

“Wow.”

It had been more than two weeks since they left Menou’s hometown of Garm, the ancient capital, and began their trek through the Wild Frontier. After putting up with this behavior for the entire journey, Menou couldn’t find it in her to engage with Akari anymore.

Speaking of which, there were two main methods of crossing the Wild Frontier.

One was walking by way of the pilgrimage route. Though the Wild Frontier was undeveloped, the route featured a clear path and regular rest stops along the way, so it was relatively safe. The other option was to take on the Wild

Frontier, but it was much more dangerous than the route Menou and Akari were currently taking. Those who chose to do so were called adventurers.

“This is our time, Menou,” Akari appealed. “We’re young, so we gotta live in the present! There’s no point looking back at the past! We’ve gotta walk toward the future!”

“You should glance at the past to prepare for the future.”

Their optimistic journey across the wasteland had gone well overall, aside from a few minor hiccups. Over the course of the past two weeks, Menou had learned exactly how to deal with Akari.

It was the same way she dealt with Momo, who wasn’t at her side right now. And unlike her dependable assistant, Akari was a hindrance. In other words, the best way to handle her was to be even colder and blunter than she was with Momo at her most excited state.

Their days spent doing nothing but walking were almost over.

“Ooh!”

The two had reached the top of the hill. Their view opened up, and Akari exclaimed in delight at the sight that spread out below them. The deep-blue sea could be seen on the horizon.

“Menou, look! It’s the ocean! And ships! And a town!”

“Yeah.” Menou smiled.

She felt a sense of accomplishment, too. Her body was exhausted, and her spirit, worn down. But once they reached their goal, all those hardships would become a sense of fulfillment.

There was a seaside town below the hill. The reddish-brown outline of the buildings was decidedly jagged. The salt breeze from the sea had worn down the cliffs into a strange shape.

“That’s Libelle, our next stop.”

Libelle, the port city.

It was a city that could be reached by leaving through the border of Grisarika

Kingdom from the ancient capital of Garm and walking the pilgrimage route across the Wild Frontier for two weeks. Libelle was not as prosperous as the famed sightseeing city of Garm. Though it was a port city, it primarily served as a fishing harbor, so its economic scale was relatively limited.

Menou looked in the opposite direction of the town, back down the path they had traversed.

This was her second time on this journey. When Menou was young, she once took this pilgrimage with her Master and mentor—Flare.

“Look. The ocean,” Flare had said.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The familiar view and the scent of the sea must have jogged her memory, for a conversation she had in this very same place replayed in the back of her mind.

“...Come on. It’s the ocean.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“This is your first time seeing it, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well? What’s your first impression?”

“It’s big.”

“Is that all?”

“And blue.”

The red-haired priestess stared down at young Menou. *“...Sheesh, you’re a boring one.”*

Standing here now, Menou finally understood how her master must have felt when she made that almost sulky remark.

“I wasn’t a very cute kid, myself, but...she did have that sort of side to her, I suppose.”

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking back on the past.” Menou narrowed her

eyes, spying something more important.

She looked out across the enormous sea to the horizon. Far off in the distance, a splotch of white was faintly visible. Following Menou's gaze, Akari noticed it, too.

"Oh, there's some clouds over the ocean, huh?" Akari commented. "If the weather's gonna take a turn for the worse, we better hurry into town."

"...No, that's no cloud." Taking care to keep her tone steady, Menou corrected her. "There's fog over the sea."

"Fog?"

"Yes."

Since they were in a somewhat elevated area, they could see a shroud of white over the horizon, dense enough to be mistaken for a cloud. Its permanent presence had nothing to do with the climate or the currents. It was because the most frightening being in existence was sealed in that spot.

A Human Error.

The cause of one of the great disasters that had scarred this world was trapped inside.

The port city was on the southern tip of the continent, closest to the site of one of the Four Major Human Errors: Pandemonium.

The church here stood on high ground that overlooked the entire city.

Libelle was in the Vanira Kingdom and south of Garm, the ancient capital of Grisarika Kingdom.

Once Menou completed the immigration check necessary to enter the city, she headed to the church. As soon as she applied for funds, the pastor wanted to speak to her.

This was part of Menou's role as an Executioner. She couldn't get Akari involved, so she sat the girl down in a pew and spoke to her seriously.

"I have to greet the pastor in charge of this church. You sit here and wait in the chapel, all right? No talking to strangers or following me. Understand?"

“Okay. That’s fine, but... Menou...”

“But?”

“What’s this?”

After Menou addressed Akari like she was instructing a five-year-old, Akari held up her hand to indicate the object wrapped around her wrist. Menou had tied it there herself just a moment ago.

“It’s a rope,” Menou responded calmly.

Akari’s mouth moved to repeat the word *rope*, but no words came. Incidentally, Menou was holding the other end.

Akari had such a strong tendency to wander off if something caught her attention. She made the perfect target for a kidnapping. Even on the pilgrimage route, she had managed to cause Menou plenty of trouble. So, as she had once threatened to do, Menou had put her on a leash.

Not literally, of course. It was only attached to her wrist, but Menou was still nodding with satisfaction.

“You can’t be trusted to wait quietly on your own. I’ve learned my lesson. Whenever I take my eyes off you, I’ll be sure to keep you on a tight leash.”

“C-come on, Menou!” Akari came back to her senses with a start and began struggling against the rope. She held her hand to her chest and raised her voice in a way that seemed almost deliberate. “Not in front of other people! Save it for when we’re alone! I know we’re attached at the hip, but I’m not ready to do this in public! It’s embarrassing!”

“Would you please be quiet?”

Akari started exclaiming hysterically in a voice loud enough for everyone in the room to hear. Menou bore down on her with a calm yet threatening smile.

“You have got to learn some self-awareness. If you keep acting this way, I’ll roll you up in a mat and drag you around instead, understand?”

“I say no to violence! Be gentler with me! All I want is your love, Menou!”

“Then you’d better behave yourself.”

“So all I have to do is behave to get your love and affection?!”

“Over my dead body.”

Anyone would guess from this exchange that they were just engaging in friendly banter.

This *was* a church, however. As a priestess, Menou could hardly bear Akari’s rowdiness and grabbed both her shoulders to give her a stern reminder.

“Listen. Just sit there quietly and wait, all right? That’s all you have to do. Even a ten-year-old could do it, so a sixteen-year-old can manage, right?”

“Menou, you worry too much. Can’t you at least loosen the rope a little bit?”

“Oh, I worry, all right. Sometimes, you’re so oblivious to danger, I worry you might be mentally ten years old. If you prove you can wait this time, I won’t have to tie you up anymore. Got it?”

“You really don’t trust me...” Akari slumped, and Menou left her there and headed for the inner sanctum of the church.

All churches were basically laid out in a similar manner, though there were some small, aesthetic differences to match the townscape. Menou reached the pastor’s office without any issues and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Excuse me.” Menou entered the room. Sitting at the desk was a gloomy, nervous-looking woman with slender features, bags under her eyes, and glasses.

She was the pastor in charge of the Faust in Libelle. Menou wasn’t familiar with her temperament, but she did know in advance that her name was Sicilia.

“Well, let’s get down to it, Ms. Menou. About your application. Let me give you my opinion...”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As soon as Menou arrived in the city, she had applied for expenses related to her duties.

Carrying money during a journey on foot would be risky, not to mention a

physical burden. If she had a regular bank account, however, influential members of the Noblesse would be able to track her.

Thus, Executioners like Menou relied on loans from the churches in their destinations. No matter where the church might be, they were expected to provide as much assistance as possible.

Of course, the amount that could be granted varied greatly from one church to the next.

“At a glance, many items in your application strike me as unnecessary. Why would you do all your traveling in the kingdom on the expensive long-distance trains, I wonder? There are certainly more cost-effective methods of transportation. In fact, I believe you could save even more money by walking from place to place. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Menou had requested money to travel from this city to the next, but the pastor in charge of the church was taking issue with her plan.

“Of course, we would like to help you as much as possible, but don’t you think it’s your responsibility to reduce your expenses as much as possible, too?”

“Yes. You’re exactly right.” Menou responded relatively calmly. She knew it was her position as an Executioner that the pastor disliked so strongly.

Executioners who worked for the holy land specialized in dirty work, and they were considered outsiders by most parishes. An unexpected visit would never be met with a warm welcome. The hospitality she had received from Archbishop Orwell in the ancient capital of Garm was a rare exception.

And as it turned out, Orwell had been committing atrocities to resist the onset of age.

Sicilia’s attitude was unpleasant but not strange. If anything, it was almost a relief to get such a normal reaction.

That said, it was a little frustrating. Menou kept a firm hold on her irritation as she objected to the pastor’s complaints.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the dangers posed by an Otherworlder. The longer our journey takes, the more danger there will be, hence the preference for

rapid transportation. Could I ask you to reconsider my request, given the circumstances?”

“My, my. So you haven’t been able to get this situation under control? Isn’t that gross negligence on your part? What have you been doing all this time? It’s your job to deal with Otherworlders, not ours, as I recall. Besides, what do you intend to do by traveling with such haste?”

Menou’s one protest was met with another wall of complaints.

She fell silent for a moment, which Sicilia used to drive home her final rejection.

“Nowhere in your plan is the ultimate goal of figuring out how to dispose of the Otherworlder accompanying you. Surely you do not truly intend to bring her to the holy land?”

Menou flinched and maintained her silence.

She was an Executioner, working in the shadows of the Faust.

It was her duty to kill Akari, who had been summoned from another world. The reason she made contact with her when she arrived in Grisarika Kingdom was to execute her.

Menou, however, had failed her duty.

She was physically unable to kill her.

“I understand this Otherworlder, Akari Tokitou, cannot be killed by any normal means. She recovers with the Pure Concept of *Time*, correct? That will not be easy to undo, I’m sure.”

Sicilia was right about that.

The moment Otherworlders were summoned, they acquired abilities called Pure Concepts. These powers were all supernatural, but Akari’s power of *Time* automatically invoked a skill called *Regression* when she was killed, undoing the very moment of her death.

Thus, Menou was traveling with Akari to keep an eye on her dangerous powers and, if possible, find an opportunity to kill her.

And Menou still had yet to discover any way to successfully execute the girl.

“You have no destination in mind and no confidence in your ability to restrain the Otherworlder, yet you ask for more money to continue your journey? I wish you’d stop joking around. You ought to take your job more seriously.”

“May I ask what exactly you’re trying to say, ma’am?”

“Certainly.” Sicilia held up the application in front of Menou’s face. “I’m saying I won’t provide you with a single coin for your shoddy travel plan.”

With that, she ripped the paper to shreds.

Menou watched expressionlessly as her application was reduced to garbage. Her eyes trailed after the strips as they fluttered to the floor, until Sicilia drew her gaze back up with a finger.

“Perhaps you weren’t aware, but our budget is far from limitless. The amount we have to provide for outsiders like you is tight.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Very good. Then you understand we must expend our money with care. We’re always looking to ensure that there’s a return proportionate to the cost demanded of us. Wouldn’t you say that makes sense?”

“So what do you propose?”

“There’s something we would like you to help us with.”

Executioners were near-universally hated. To local church administrators, requests for funding from people like Menou were nothing but outsiders coming in to beg for money.

At the same time, there wasn’t a single person in the Faust who would doubt the abilities of an Executioner, who had undergone arduous training in the holy land and been selected for the job.

“If you can offer a real contribution to our cause, I certainly won’t turn up my nose at you. We will offer the money you applied for as a contingency fee.”

Thus, it was quite common to be given conditions like this one.

“Sigh...”

After meeting up with Akari in the chapel, Menou heaved a sigh as they stepped outside.

The specifics of the request she'd been given sounded unmistakably annoying. When she submitted her funding application, she'd been resigned to a certain degree of haggling, but this was just aggravating.

They couldn't continue their journey without any money, however. First, they had to secure a hotel. *I'll just have to figure something out*, Menou thought, rubbing her temples.

She looked up to find Akari peering closely at her face.

"You tired, Menou?"

"I suppose. Money problems are universal, after all."

"Really? I guess now that you mention it, you seemed kinda poor when we first met."

"Well, excuse me for being broke."

It was true that when she met Akari, she didn't have much leeway in her budget. Besides, she worked for the church. She would never earn a salary beyond expenses for her missions and the bare minimum needed to live. That was the nature of the Faust.

As Menou looked back at Akari, her gaze automatically turned reproachful.

Originally, she was supposed to have killed Akari the day they met. In fact, she had buried a knife in the back of the girl's neck so skillfully that Akari never even noticed.

But Akari was resurrected by the *Regression* ability of her Pure Concept, *Time*. Menou concluded it would be impossible to assassinate her alone, and thus, she was stuck traveling around with the girl—all to find a method to kill Akari, who was immortal with her Pure Concept of *Time*.

Immediately after that realization, however, they were confronted with the archbishop's crimes and forced to flee Garm quickly.

I'll lower my hotel standards by one star, Menou decided silently. *I'll put up with a cold shower if I have to. The sheets might smell moldy, but I can deal with*

that, too.

“Ahh... But...”

As Menou slumped with disappointment at the thought of resting her weary bones in a shabby hotel, a hand suddenly grabbed her arm tightly and tugged her forward.

“I dunno what’s bothering you, but a little sightseeing will cheer you up for sure!”

“Er...”

Akari’s eyes sparkled. Most likely, brightening Menou’s spirits was just an excuse to explore this unfamiliar city.

Menou was in no mood. More importantly, her wallet wasn’t up for the task. Putting her mission-related expenses in this town aside, the money for the next leg of their journey was a contingency fee, dependent on the completion of her task. What a dreadful world. *Up-front payment ought to be a universal policy*, Menou thought bleakly.

“We can’t. There’s not enough...”

Money, she was about to say, but then Menou trailed off.

She sensed a familiar presence from the shadows of the street. At the same time, her scripture glowed faintly. It was a Guiding Force signal that could only be relayed between scriptures that were in sync. Without opening her book, Menou silently read the message being spelled out inside, not alerting Akari.

“What’s the matter, Menou? Aw, it’s not your fault you’re poor. I can deal with it, don’t worry!”

“...Change of plans.”

Ignoring the other girl’s misplaced magnanimity, Menou adjusted her plans for the day. If she carried out her task, she would receive funds for the requisite investigation. Then she could simply cover the sightseeing costs as part of those investigation funds. Menou still held a little resentment toward that bespectacled pastor, after all.

“Now, let’s get going! We’re splurging today, Akari!”

“My love got through to you!” Akari always managed to twist her words. Menou eyed the exuberant girl suspiciously.

“I’m calling it off if you’re going to keep being stupid.”

“I’m sorry! Please go sightseeing with meee!” Akari immediately latched on to Menou. “I wanna see the sights with you, Menou! Okay? Okay! So please don’t change your miiind!”

“All right, all right. Fine. Just let go of me already.” Menou briskly pushed the crying girl’s face away from hers, and Akari broke into a smile. Menou couldn’t quite hold back a little grin when she saw her roller coaster of expressions.

“So where should we go first?”

“Let me see...”

Sightseeing could encompass any number of things. They could look at buildings, try some of the local delicacies, or go visit the harbor of this port city.

But they had just finished a long journey. Menou tugged on her ponytail and stared thoughtfully at Akari.

After two weeks of walking across a wasteland, they were more than a little dirty. And after considering the message she’d just received in her scripture, she came up with a destination that would accomplish several goals at once.

“Let’s go to the bathhouse.”

Plunk. Ripples spread on the surface of the hot water.

“Ahhh...”

Akari let out a sigh that was almost suggestive in tone. Judging by her expression as she sank up to her shoulders into the hot water of the steamy bathhouse, she was quite content.

“It’s the perfect temperature. All the stress is melting away... It feels so goood.”

Sure enough, her body and even her face were relaxed to the point of melting. Once she finished her assessment out loud, she let her lips slide under the water and blew bubbles, a decidedly poor show of manners.

Menou, too, was next to her in the public bathhouse. She had her light-tawny hair wrapped up in a towel and was stretching out her legs, enjoying the hot water.

“Phew...” She let out a sigh as she relaxed. The pleasant warmth spreading through her body seemed to melt the exhaustion away. On the pilgrimage, there were few opportunities to use hot water. Usually, they had the option of taking a cold shower or wiping themselves down with a damp towel.

Akari stretched both hands out in front of her.

“I sorta thought calling a trip to a bathhouse a ‘splurge’ was just proof of your poor-person mindset, but this is great. Plus, we’ve got the place to ourselves!”

“Well, it is the middle of the afternoon. Also, you don’t have to keep pointing out that I’m poor. A priestess is pure, proper, and powerful, remember? In other words, this is honorable poverty.”

“Okay, okaaay. You’re pure, proper, and powerful. I get it.”

Akari and Menou were the only two people in the large bath. Since there was no one around to see them, they were free to stretch out and relax in the hot water.

“Heeey, Menou.”

“Hmm?”

“We’re traveling to a place called the holy land, right?”

“That’s right.”

As they soaked in the hot water, the pair conversed in sluggish tones.

“So you actually remembered. I’m glad I bothered explaining it to you, then.”

“Of course I remember. So there are other people in this world who got summoned like me or came through natural phenomena? You said protecting those people in this ‘holy land’ place is part of your job.”

Officially, the Faust called people like Akari who had come from other worlds “lost lambs” and took care of them. Menou had told Akari when they first met that the point of their journey was to take her there.

“And you said that long ago there was a more advanced state of cultural development and stuff, too! That’s why people understand Japanese, even though it’s a different world, right?”

“That’s correct. There was an ancient civilization that used the knowledge of Otherworlders to advance themselves. And so the language here is quite similar to Japanese.”

Menou nodded, pleased that her teachings on the road thus far had been worthwhile.

However, there was one part of the truth that differed drastically from what Akari had learned.

When they were summoned, whether intentionally or by chance, Japanese people gained powerful abilities called Pure Concepts. These powers were inevitably unstable. Each time they were used, the Otherworlders’ memories faded, and their personalities changed, until finally, they became threats known as Human Errors and caused immense damage at random. This was also what had destroyed that highly advanced culture and its science, which was said to have even reached the stars.

The Sword of Salt. Starhusk. Pandemonium. Mechanical Society.

These four Human Errors were especially damaging and had left massive and unusual scars on the land that remained even a millennium later.

Based on this grim history, a system was formed in which Executioners like Menou quietly erased Otherworlders before they could cause harm in this world. Menou was bringing Akari on this journey to find a way to assassinate her despite the power that resurrected her when she was killed.

“But y’know, it’s been fun being in this world, even if some stuff has been hard. Which gets me thinking...”

Akari knew nothing of Menou’s true intentions or circumstances.

She placed her full trust in Menou, smiling warmly at her in the bath.

“It might be nice if I could just keep traveling with you in this world forever.”

Her blissful voice punctured a hole in Menou’s chest. Her eyes widened in

surprise, and her lips moved in silence as she searched for an answer. Eventually, her shoulders sagged.

“...Don’t be stupid.”

Though Akari looked like she still wanted to enjoy the bath, Menou stood up, sending waves across the water’s surface.

Her body was sufficiently warmed up. There was no point staying any longer.

“There wouldn’t be a journey without a destination. Traveling without a purpose is just putting the cart before the horse.”

“You think? Personally, I’ve always liked making little stops along the way. Sometimes you learn a lot while you’re on the road, too.”

“Is that right? Well, I’m getting out.”

“Okaaay. I’ll be out in bit...”

Akari was the type to linger in the bath. She started to wave from the tub, but her hand paused as she stared at Menou.

“...Y’know, you have a great body, Menou,” Akari murmured, full of admiration.

Menou had long, smooth legs and a balanced build. She looked slender, but her muscles were solid. Though she wasn’t especially tall, she had a powerful presence with her lovely facial features and self-assured stature.

Just as Akari said, she had a well-proportioned body that could make even other women fall in love.

Menou narrowed her eyes as Akari stared.

“Stop ogling me.”

“Ack!”

She used one of her slim legs to splash water at the other girl, reprimanding her for commenting on someone else’s body in a bathhouse. Then she used the towel that was keeping her hair in place to cover up her front and prodded at Akari’s considerable bust, which was bobbing in the water.

“You wouldn’t like it if someone told you ‘you’ve got a great rack’ or

something, would you?”

“Hmph. I don’t mind if it’s you, Menou!” Akari stood up from the water with a splash, responding almost instinctively.

Compared to Menou, who was toned from years of diligent training, Akari’s body was soft enough to pinch around her belly and arms. Her feminine curves contrasted with her youthful face, and they seemed to only accentuate each other. Most of all, her chest was impressive enough to warrant envy from other women and tended to attract attention from others.



“Please describe your opinion of my body in two hundred words or less!”

“How stupid are you?”

“Very!”

Akari was at least self-aware. In response to her nonsensical request, Menou only offered one short sentence: “Be quiet and bathe.”

“Waaa-brg-lb-lb-lb-l!”

Knocking Akari back into the water with a quick foot sweep, Menou promptly left the bath behind.

Menou swiftly put on her priestess robes in the changing room and moved to the post-bath lounge. Since it was the middle of the day, there weren’t many other patrons around. But just as Menou was sitting down on a sofa...

“Darliiiiing!”

...Someone tackled Menou’s still-steaming, freshly bathed form.

Unlike Menou’s indigo getup, this girl was wearing white priestess robes. Her pink hair was put up in two pigtails with the scrunchies Menou had bought her as a present in Garm.

“Finally, my darling in the flesh! The real deal! It’s me, your beloved Momo, and you’re mine, all miiiine!”

It was a passionate embrace; the attacker seemed to be in shockingly high spirits.

This was Menou’s junior and assistant, Momo. Menou was unsurprised. After all, it was she who had sent Menou a message via her scripture before they came to the bathhouse.

“You took a bath, didn’t you? You’re so warm and smooth and wonderful fresh out of the baaath. I would’ve liked to relax in the bath with you, too... I’ll put a curse on that damned boob-lady who got to take a bath with you so she slips in there and drooowns!”

“Yes, yes. We’ll have to bathe together some other time.”

“Yaaay!”

Menou comforted her rather overdramatic assistant and was rewarded with a glowing smile.

Since Momo was assisting Menou as an Executioner, they had to keep her existence a secret to Akari. Thus, Momo was acting alone and had arrived in the city shortly before Menou and Akari.

This meant she had taken a far harsher route through the Wild Frontier with barely enough equipment and still got there faster than the pilgrimage route. And as if that wasn't already impressive, she had managed to contact Menou via a communication conjuring as soon as she arrived in the city, all while avoiding being seen by Akari. In fact, her grasp of Menou's movements was so thorough that it almost made Menou want to ask how she had done it.

"I can't believe we were separated for two whole weeeeks! Your poor Momo was so lonely, thinking only about you all day and night! I even dreamed about this day. Our reunion calls for a celebratiooon!"

"All right, all right. I was sad to be separated from my brilliant junior, too."

"Hee-hee! Me? Brilliant? Only just a little!"

When Menou patted her hair, Momo melted into a dreamy smile. A simple girl. But that simplicity was reserved only for Menou. When she wasn't acting cute, Momo could be downright merciless and cold-blooded.

"You're the best in the whole world, darliing. No one else could make me so happy with just a brief meeting! You're my oasis!"

"There, there. Good girl, Momo. You're the best assistant in the world."

"That's me! A good giiirl. Don't be shy—keep petting me and praising me. I live for nothing but your head pats!"

"Well, anyway. There's work to discuss, Momo."

"Awww, man..." Momo was busily rubbing her cheek against Menou's hand, but her face turned pouty when the other girl changed the subject. "Work again? When you just got in to tooown?"

"Afraid so. I've been given a job to do in exchange for the funds."

"Come on. This always happееееens..."

“It certainly does.”

Momo reluctantly pulled away from Menou, looking very dissatisfied. She was an Executioner’s aide, after all, so she was used to getting bogged down with other work to earn their regular pay.

Menou explained what Sicilia had told her about the city’s situation.

“The Fourth are currently infesting this city, it seems. So they want our assistance in dealing with them.”

“Yikes... The Fourth are in this city, too?”

“They’re everywhere, really. Where there’s one mouse, there will be more.”

The Fourth referred to a citizens’ group who touted ideologies that once dominated the continent. In a world where society was divided up into three estates of the realm—the Faust, the Noblesse, and the Commons—they were a self-proclaimed fourth group in the social hierarchy.

To put it simply, their group believed that humans should not be limited by social estates or status.

This “Fourth Ideology,” which extolled freedom and independence, once experienced a brief bout of explosive popularity. Associated with his group were the terrorists Menou and company had encountered on the train here from Grisarika Kingdom.

“The group is just dregs at this point. If Master hadn’t caught their so-called Director, they could have been a serious threat by now. We mustn’t let our guards down.”

“Yes, I have heard they had influence in the paaast. Master should’ve torn up the whole group from the roots while she was at it. Because she left the job half-finished, these offshoots got carried awaaay...”

“She’s certainly the one who caught the Director of the Fourth, but I don’t think even she could have wiped them out entirely...”

Momo was blaming their Master, but the Fourth was more of an ideology than a single organization.

They maintained themselves as a sort of coalition of organizations with similar

beliefs, which was why the leader was referred to as the Director. The remnants that had scattered across the nations varied in scale and power; since they weren't actually working together, it was that much harder to eradicate them completely.

"They call themselves a citizens' group, so what they're doing isn't technically illegal, riiight? Can't the Order of Knights just take care of it?"

"Of course, they're already monitoring the Fourth in Libelle, too. I have a written report from them."

"Ooh. Sounds like the Faust and the knights get along surprisingly well in this city, hmm?"

The Noblesse and the Commons forming and managing a citizens' group was permitted in nations all over the continent, so that was ordinary enough in itself. Generally, the stance was that as long as they weren't committing any crimes, they were free to believe whatever they pleased. They were allowed to refer to themselves by the name of the Fourth, which was generally seen as a semi-terrorist organization. It simply meant that most other Common folk frowned upon them, the Order of Knights—the Noblesse—kept close watch on them, and the Faust considered them potentially dangerous.

"From what I heard, I can't criticize Pastor Sicilia for her work...though her personality leaves a lot to be desired."

"Well, a good personality and job proficiency are rarely related. Master is a perfect example of thaaat."

"True. In fact, her awful personality might be part of why she was so good at her job."

While the pair took pleasure in badmouthing the unusual leader of the monastery where they were raised, Menou pulled out some documents from a bag she had left in the changing room: the information Sicilia had given her at the church.

There was no sign that Akari would come out of the bath anytime soon, so Menou continued her explanation to Momo.

"Pastor Sicilia wants the assistance of Executioners for two reasons. First,

because just the other day, a knight was seriously wounded by a member of the Fourth.”

“A knight, you saaay...” Momo’s eyes sharpened immediately.

In this world, the Noblesse carried out the duties of a government. Among them, the Order of Knights was responsible for law enforcement in most cities and towns and thus underwent arduous training to be ready for battle. It was unthinkable that they would be defeated by a group that only dabbled in conjuring.

“I suppose the occasional Common adventurer might have enough skill, but that’s so raaare...”

“And certainly not the case this time. Here, read this.” Menou pointed at one of the bullet points on the documents she’d given Momo, which contained the relevant information. “It seems a strange drug has been circulating among the Fourth in this city for the last two or three weeks. The top brass have been supplying them with something called ‘monstrine.’”

“...So it’s an illegal drug, hmm? I can’t understand why anyone would take that stuuuff. Are they out of their minds? I bet they’ll self-destruct if we leave them alone, nooo?”

“That would be great, but I think it’s worse than what you’re imagining.”

Momo wrinkled her nose skeptically; she must have assumed monstrine was a stimulant that made one feel powerful or pumped happiness-inducing chemicals into the brain. Menou pulled out a sample that had been given to Pastor Sicilia by a knight who was investigating the Fourth.

It was an unnaturally deep-red pill, almost like coagulated blood. Any experienced conjurer would be able to feel the Guiding Force radiating off of it.

Momo couldn’t hide her revulsion at the sinister aura the pill produced.

“To think they committed taboo related to the Concept of Original Sin just to make some silly drug... The Fourth in this town sure have some nerve, don’t theeey?”

“Agreed. They’ve certainly underestimated the Faust, too.”

Original Sin Conjuring.

It was a form of conjuring that involved offering a sacrifice to draw out power from another world. In most cases, Original Sin Conjuring required the offering of human flesh, spirits, or souls. The creation of the red pill in Menou's hands, then, had almost certainly involved a human sacrifice.

"It's possible they wanted to make money by circulating it through a port city, or that they were trying to increase their fighting forces by giving it to more extreme members. Whatever the goal, they've gotten involved with illicit activities. Executioners have every right to deal with whoever knows the recipe for this drug accordingly."

"Can't we just forget about this one, darliiiiing? It's the city's own fault for letting their Fourth run wild." Now that she knew the situation, Momo had on a fierce smile. "We have enough on our plate trying to kill that boob-lady! Let's just keep moving instead of getting involved in this city's probleeems."

Momo seemed to feel that none of this was important to them, but Menou frowned.

"But we don't have any money."

"No need to fear. Leave those money troubles to your dear Momo!"

"How do you mean?"

It was highly unlikely that Momo was any better off in the financial department. After all, it was usually Menou who covered her funds since Momo was her aide.

"Hee-hee, I found some real treasures in the Wild Frontier. And I sold them in the market for a pretty hefty profit! It seems like even junk goes for a good price in this tooown."

Unlike Menou, who'd taken the pilgrimage for two weeks, Momo had made her way through the untamed part of the Wild Frontier.

Off the beaten path, the Wild Frontier was so dangerous that there weren't even any detailed maps in existence. This meant, however, there were ancient ruins still undiscovered. The job of exploring those areas fell onto the

adventurers, but Momo had evidently dabbled in a bit of adventuring herself along the way.

“And I ran into that damned Princess-poo for some reason, so I shoved her into a dangerous part of the ancient ruins and left her there. If we’re lucky, she might even be deeead!”

Momo’s eyes sparkled as she made this disturbing declaration, which involved a very unexpected guest appearance.

Menou hadn’t met her personally, but the princess of the Grisarika Kingdom seemed to be linked to Momo by some strange stroke of fate. They had been staying in Grisarika Kingdom until not too long ago, and during the incident with the archbishop, Momo and Ashuna had somehow faced off *and* teamed up temporarily.

“Wait... Why would the princess be coming here? Isn’t her nation in a state of utter chaos right now?”

“Nothing that Princess-poo does makes any sense. She probably just wanted to satisfy her thirst for battle, I beeet.”

Momo didn’t seem to be very fond of Princess Ashuna, and apparently, they’d butted heads again in the Wild Frontier. Certainly, if the princess had chosen to plunge through the Wild Frontier rather than take the pilgrimage route to cross the border, then she clearly wasn’t the rational type.

Although Momo said she’d ditched her in some dangerous ruins, she was likely still alive. Based on what Menou had heard, Ashuna had an incredible natural talent for conjuring. She wasn’t the sort of princess who would die if left in a little danger.

“Well, that’s enough about Princess Ashuna for now... The church has given us quite a job, like it or not. So I’m going to see it through.”

“Booo...” Momo puffed up her cheeks. Her attitude clearly stated that she would ditch the job if it were up to her. “You’re too nice. People who can’t even keep their own territory in check should just be left to their own devices.”

“Don’t say that. Anyway, you ought to use your money however you like.”

“But, darling, I can’t think of any use for it but to give it to yooou.”

“Cut it out,” Menou declined. Was she in such a sorry state that she had to be financially supported by her *assistant*?

Besides, though she hated to admit it, Sicilia had spoken the truth when they discussed the application. There was no point in pushing ahead aimlessly without a concrete goal.

Menou had to come up with a plan to kill Akari.

And it just so happened that there was one place in this city that might serve as a clue.

“As far as the monstine, it doesn’t seem like it’s coming from outside. They must be managing the production of the illicit ingredients somewhere within city limits.”

“Which means those materials must be made from...”

“Residents of this city, yes. Most likely. But the strange thing is that there haven’t been many people reported missing.”

“Well, it could be that no one is filing missing persons reports. We’ll need to wait for more information, I thiink.”

Holding the reports from Pastor Sicilia, Momo and Menou exchanged information. The next topic of discussion was about the nature of research conducted by the Fourth. Since a knight had managed to infiltrate their ranks to investigate, the report was considerably detailed.

When she read the last part of that report, Momo’s face stiffened.

“They’re analyzing Pandemonium... You don’t think—?”

“You can ignore that part.”

Momo looked serious for the first time, but Menou shook her head.

It was understandable that Momo would be alarmed. The threat was so grave that even Menou had let her expression slip when she first saw it.

Pandemonium.

It referred to a certain area on the ocean to the south of this city. It was the

place Menou had briefly discussed with Akari on the hill right before they arrived.

Pandemonium. The remains of one of the Four Major Human Errors.

However, the very nature of the place was that it was sealed away.

“This is the closest settlement to Pandemonium. And they’re making this pill here. If there are people who thirst for power, it’s only natural they would take an interest. But they’ll never be able to figure out Pandemonium’s secrets. Even the Faust can’t do anything about that fog. The ancient civilization might’ve been able to do something, but it’s beyond the reach of any humans alive today.”

One of the Four Major Human Errors... An existence on par with the Sword of Salt, which Menou had seen stuck into the far-west island as a child. It was lurking somewhere in that fog.

The Alliance of Southern Islands, which had flourished as its own major nation, vanished from the map a thousand years ago. Entire islands disappeared without a trace, and there was no longer any way to guess what remained within the realm where Pandemonium existed.

The entire concept of the territory had been eaten away.

Just as the Sword of Salt turned the former western continent into salt that melted away into the ocean, Pandemonium was what remained of the maritime nation known as the Alliance of Southern Islands, which once prospered.

Such a legendary atrocity existed in the sea to the south of the port city of Libelle.

“If they had any type of magic powerful enough to undo that fog, the Fourth wouldn’t just be sitting around distributing suspicious drugs. So we can ignore that.”

“Riiight! Of course! A brilliant theory. I love my darling—so cool, clever, and incredible!”

“All right, all right.” Menou dealt with Momo’s usual onslaught by patting her on the head. “One more thing. As far as this so-called monstine, there’s a

bigger problem besides the Fourth's research findings, which is—"

Just as Menou was about to explain something that wasn't in the documents, she heard footsteps in the hallway leading to the changing room. Momo exchanged looks with Menou. As soon as Menou nodded, Momo left without a sound.

Just as Momo disappeared, Akari poked her head into the room.

Fresh out of the bath, steam was still coming off Akari's head. Droplets of water slid down her flushed face and neck as she peered around the changing room.

"Hmm? Menou, were you talking to someone? I thought I sensed some kinda presence in here that made me really angry for no reason..."

"Since when can you sense presences? You're just imagining things. Hurry up and dry yourself off."

"Oomph!"

What was she talking about? She had never even met Momo. Besides, there was no way that Akari—dense, happy-go-lucky Akari, whose crisis management abilities were somewhere in the negatives—could sense any sort of presence. As Menou tossed a towel over the girl's soaking head to silence her, a thought suddenly crossed her mind.

Akari wasn't just immortal.

She could travel from the future to the past with *Regression*.

It was hard to say without any evidence, but it was possible that Akari had invoked a worldwide *Regression* with her Pure Concept of *Time*, returned to the past, and was doing this journey over again. Akari didn't seem to have any memories or awareness of this herself, but Menou was halfway convinced this might be the case.

After all, from the moment they met, Akari had immediately trusted Menou. She wasn't just being overly familiar—even at their first meeting, she showed complete, defenseless faith.

So maybe her statement just now was affected by vestiges of prior memories.

Menou asked as casually as she could: “Say, Akari. Since we arrived here, have you had a sense of déjà vu? The first time we met, you went on about fate. Have you felt anything similar?”

“Hmm? Not really.”

“I see.” Menou had slightly hoped she might glean some kind of information, but the response yielded no such thing. “Well, I was given a little assignment at the church, so we’ll be staying in Libelle for a week or so. Let’s find a hotel and call it a day. We can sightsee tomorrow.”

“Okaaay.” Akari rubbed the moisture from her hair with the towel.

“Sit here, Akari. I’ll dry your hair for you.”

“Yaaay!”

“In exchange, I’ll be borrowing some of your Guiding Force.”

“Aww, whaaat? But that really tickles...”

“No complaining.” Menou placed a hand on Akari’s shoulder and reached for the flow of Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Akari Tokitou—Extract [Power]—

“Eek!” Akari’s shoulders shivered. Her lips twitched as if she was holding back laughter.

Normally, when one person tried to use another’s Guiding Force, their body, soul, and spirit would react and reject the other person. The only people who could connect Guiding Force were those who trusted one another in their hearts.

Menou let the power she’d extracted flow into the crest on her dagger.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

The crest conjuring took the form of a soft breeze and ruffled through Akari’s hair. Menou directed the breeze from her dagger, combing Akari’s hair as it dried.

She didn’t really need to borrow Akari’s powers to invoke such a small conjuring, but for some reason, she had the urge to confirm Akari’s trust.

“...Well, we’ll just have to be careful. Remember, you’re an easy target. To people in the know, lost lambs are highly valuable and sought-after.”

“Okaaaay. It’ll be fine, though! I’ve got you to protect me.”

“That’s easy for you to say...”

As she dried Akari’s hair, Menou mused on the piece of information she hadn’t managed to finish relaying to Momo earlier.

Manon Libelle.

The name appeared in the documents as a provider of the monstine. As her surname implied, she was the daughter of Count Libelle, the head of the Noblesse in this city.

If she was in the highest ranks of the Noblesse, she must have had access to some knowledge of conjuring. The use of conjuring, however, was highly regulated by the Faust. Especially if it involved the Concept of Original Sin.

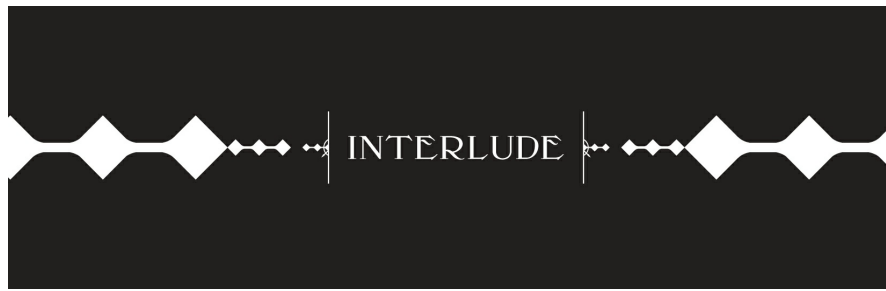
She was evidently right around Menou and Akari’s age. It was highly unlikely, then, that Manon Libelle had managed to produce the Guiding vessel for the creation of the monstine alone.

“Maybe there’s something at work in the shadows here.”

The particulars of this incident were still shrouded in fog. Menou would remember the name of Manon Libelle as someone to be highly cautious of while they were in this city.

What was the reason Akari might have turned back time for the world?

Since she didn’t know the future, Menou couldn’t exactly say that it wasn’t related to this Libelle person.



She had grown so tired of walking.

She was tired of the inconvenience of the barren wasteland, of the lack of entertainment or satisfaction. Walking down the road, Akari had no energy left. She didn't have the strength to talk, to smile, to do anything but trudge forward.

"Come on, we're almost there!"

"...Uh-huh." Akari didn't lift her head, just grunted a quiet response. The girl walking by her side was trying to encourage her by talking to her cheerfully, but her heart was so worn down that she didn't even have the energy to really respond.

Even the gentle slope of this small hill was frustrating to her. At this point, she was sick of just about everything.

"Akari. Look up."

She dragged her gaze up from the ground and finally looked around.

In front of her was a sparkling blue sea, glittering in the sunlight.

She hadn't even noticed when they made it to the top of the hill. The view in front of her filled her with a quiet sense of accomplishment.

"Well? That feels pretty good, doesn't it?"

"....." Akari lowered her head again. She could tell without looking that the other girl had on a strained smile.

"I'm sorry. I know this has been hard for you. We'll be able to rest in just a few more minutes!"

"...Uh-huh." Akari hated herself for being too gloomy to voice her feelings.

In retrospect, she had caused nothing but trouble on the way here, too. Even in that first city, they were too late to catch the train they had tickets for

because of Akari's dawdling and ended up having to wait more than half a day for the next one. Although the other girl said they were able to avoid a disaster because of it, Akari knew she was nothing but baggage.

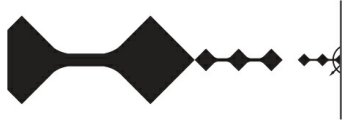
She did have a so-called Pure Concept power, but all it could do was fix objects and injuries. And she'd been told that she didn't have to use that power. Since her companion was a seasoned traveler, she never even got injured in the first place.

Akari wanted to be happier, to be true to her feelings.

At least, that was how she felt when the other girl talked to her brightly to cheer her up.

Instead of only noticing the bad things, she wanted to be the kind of person who could innocently enjoy a journey to the point of seeming simple-minded. She kept thinking about it as she set foot into the port city.

That was Akari's first time seeing Libelle.



No One Knows Where the Fog Goes



Tup, tup. Akari bounced up the staircase with light footsteps.

In the sunny port city, the wind was blowing toward the sea. Leaving the hotel and heading out for a stroll, Akari appeared to be in high spirits as she rushed into the wind.

Looks like she's having fun, Menou thought as she watched her.

It had been two days since they arrived in Libelle, and Menou and Akari had spent them walking around its streets.

Though the port city was primarily used for fishing, it wasn't without any sightseeing spots. Besides, being surrounded by buildings and structures so different from the ones in their hometown was interesting enough that just walking around was full of fun little discoveries.

There was a considerable difference in elevation from the coastline to the heart of the city. On these slanted streets, no two homes had their roofs at the same height. At present, Menou and Akari were climbing up a stair-like brickwork path with residences on either side.

Just as they were about to reach the top, Akari suddenly stopped in place.

She twirled around to face Menou, holding out her hands and forming a frame with both thumbs and index fingers.

"Yep, that's a keeper. I'll call it 'The Sea, the City, and Menou'!"

"Great."

Akari seemed in a brighter mood than ever as she pretended to snap a photo of Menou.

She smiled down at the priestess, her black hair fluttering in the sea breeze.

Menou considered pointing out that the salt was going to ruin her hair, but Akari's expression was so gleeful that she couldn't bring herself to ruin the fun.

"Well, I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"Uh-huh!" Akari chirped back innocently. "I'm glad I'm enjoying myself, too!"

Akari seemed to get a great deal of pleasure from looking around new places. Menou was very knowledgeable from her Executioner training and was a veteran traveler for similar reasons, so she gave a tour with explanations that delighted Akari.

"I don't know all that much about it myself, but Libelle is a nice place."

It was a bit more rural than the ancient capital where they'd been staying before, but since it was close to the border, it wasn't remote by any means, either. Time seemed to flow a little more slowly in the peaceful seaside city, and since there were so many people coming in and out, it was friendly to outsiders, too.

Most of all, since it was a port city, the fish was incredibly fresh. After two weeks of eating nothing but preserved foods, Menou and Akari were happy to feast on fresh fish from morning until night.

Gazing out at the ocean, Akari pointed at something.

"Menou! I just found something wonderful. I wanna go to where that castle is over there!"

"Where...? Ah, the castle town on Libelle Island."

Akari was pointing at an island that was linked to the mainland by a narrow road. It was a small landmass with a chalk-white castle at the center and twenty or so large buildings surrounding it.

This city was built near where a volcano had erupted long ago, so the terrain was quite rocky. The hill they climbed before arriving was actually the remains of a mountain that had been whittled away.

The island Akari was pointing at had been formed by lava long ago. The lava had flowed into the ocean, cooled, and solidified, becoming an island that was just off the continent.

“Unfortunately, that island doesn’t allow unauthorized entry.”

“Really?” Akari asked.

“I’m afraid that most of it is private property of the Noblesse, including the castle itself.”

Scenic islands tended to become either church facilities or the sites of vacation homes for the rich. In this case, it was the latter.

“I imagine the only people besides the Noblesse who can enter are members of the Faust who have business there or exceptionally wealthy Common folk.”

“But aren’t you in the Faust, Menou?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any business there. I’m not important enough to be appointed to negotiate with the Noblesse or anything.”

Libelle Castle, the château on that remote island, was home to the Noblesse in charge of governing Libelle. The lord of that castle was most likely Count Libelle, whose family made up the majority of the Noblesse in this city.

Akari furrowed her brow at the mention of the Noblesse. “It belongs to the Noblesse...? You mean those guys, right?”

“That’s right. We can’t say they’re the same as the Noblesse who summoned you, since they’re from a different nation, but they are the same social estate. We should avoid them if we can help it.”

After all, it was the Noblesse of Grisarika Kingdom who had summoned Akari as an Otherworlder. It was no wonder she didn’t have a good impression of them.

Maybe that was why she looked frustrated as she stared at the castle in the center of the island.

“So that means we can’t go see that island?”

“No, we can’t. You’ll have to give up on that one.”

The island was Noblesse territory. It was essentially considered a town of its own, separate from the port city. One couldn’t enter Libelle Castle or its surrounding area without an invitation. And since it was surrounded by the

ocean, it would be difficult to infiltrate.

The Noblesse were divided into separate ranks depending on their roles. Counts were generally local administrators who primarily gathered the opinions of those below them and negotiated with the Faust. Menou had heard it was a difficult and stressful position, but that had nothing to do with her.

The knights who were in charge of maintaining public order were treated very differently. In Grisarika Kingdom, the princess herself had been a knight until recently, which was proof enough of the wide range in roles and approaches among the Noblesse.

“Aww, darn. It looks like such a cool castle...”

“You seem to really like those types of buildings, huh? You were the same way in Garm.”

“Well, yeah. Look how pretty it is! All girls dream about castles, you know!”

“Do they?”

Was that a particularly Japanese belief, or just her view as an average citizen? Either way, Akari always pointed and got very excited whenever she saw a castle.

Menou’s first thought upon seeing a castle, on the other hand, tended to be *What would be the best way to break in?* In this particular case, Libelle Castle might very well be the stronghold of the Fourth, who she was supposed to be investigating. Obviously, her impression of the place was far from positive.

“Ah, you can see that fog we saw before from here, too. I guess it really isn’t a cloud,” Akari observed.

“...Uh-huh.”

The white fog of Pandemonium was once again within view.

After Orwell tried to brainwash Akari in the ceremonial hall two weeks prior, it was discovered that she was using white liquid taken from the site of the Starhusk disaster in the northern part of the continent. The ceremonial conjuring that used materials from one of the Four Major Human Errors could interfere with and alter even an Otherworlder’s Pure Concept.

That was the frightening power of the Four Major Human Errors.

Which was why a certain idea had arisen in Menou's mind.

If she were to throw Akari into that fog, wasn't it possible that she might not be able to recover?

"...I suppose it's worth a try."

"Hmm? What's up, Menou?"

"Looking at the ocean just gave me an excellent idea, Akari."

Since Akari had noticed her talking to herself, Menou quickly smoothed it over with a quiet chuckle.

"Since we're in a port city, let's go see the ocean next!"

"Wooo!" Akari let out a cheer.

Nothing had happened there for around a thousand years, but the church still regularly observed the area, as far as Menou knew. If she asked Sicilia, they should be able to borrow one little ship without too much trouble.

"We'll get on a ship and head out to the water. You can leave the sailing to me! I'm a pure, proper, and powerful priestess! I can do just about anything if I try!"

"Yaaay, Menou! You're so pure, proper, and powerful!"

"But of course. I'm a priestess, after all!"

Akari's eyes sparkled at Menou's suggestion even as the latter was making calculations. The innocent joy on Akari's face made Menou's heart twinge.

It was the same prickling pain she'd felt in Garm: the strange sensation in her chest when she tried to kill Akari. What was it? Menou wasn't so dull that she didn't know.

It was guilt.

What a nuisance, she thought to herself.

Menou was an Executioner, but none of her missions ever involved spending much time with the target, until this one. She pulled off most of her

assassinations by surprise or within the course of a day at the most.

It had been three weeks now since she met Akari.

But Menou's guilt didn't change the fact that she had to kill Akari.

It was fine. Probably.

She wasn't the sort of person to let her conscience bother her.

Menou wasn't really just a pure, proper, and powerful priestess. She had taken many lives. And why did she kill people? After the battle in Garm, she was all the more certain of the answer.

Because she was a villain.

"A ship sounds great, though! I wanna do that one thing. Y'know, where I stand on the prow and spread my arms out wide!"

"What?"

"Riiight. I guess you wouldn't know about movies here..."

It didn't matter if she was never in the light. If she could never be saved. Menou had to take lives, to make sure that no more people like herself were ever created.

That was her role as an Executioner.

She repeated this to herself, her reason for being.

She had no choice but to keep on reminding herself in the face of Akari's smile.

Drifting on and on. She lived her life going along with the flow.

She never felt her own weight, her own will. If anything, there was only her role from when she was born.

So when she found the girl who had been swept onto the beach by the current, as twilight turned into night, she felt sure that their meeting was meant to be. As she reflected on that encounter from three weeks ago, Manon Libelle desperately bit back a yawn.

Each time another wave of sleepiness started to rise within her, she clenched

her teeth and widened her eyes. A tear welled up, but she managed to stop herself from the rudeness of opening her mouth wide.

“Haaaah...”

The girl with soft, relaxed features just barely turned her yawn into a sigh. Her thick, perfectly smoothed hair was tied in a braid and dangled in front of one shoulder. Even more unique was the fact that she was wearing a kimono.

It was made of dyed cloth and tied around the waist with an obi. This garment had existed since the days of the ancient civilization over a thousand years ago, but it hadn't spread very far, so it was unusual to see someone wearing it. One glance at Manon with her hands neatly clasped in her lap would probably convince anyone that she was a lovely, graceful young woman.

Currently, she was seated at a round table with ten or so other people, who were all fervently exchanging opinions.

“Are we sure we can trust the information that she's here?”

“It's from a member who was in the next nation over. If we calculate time from the incident that took place in the ancient capital of Garm in Grisarika Kingdom, it makes sense that they would arrive in this town next.”

“This is an unfortunate turn of events...”

The others ranged in age from an elderly person in their seventies to a woman in her late twenties. It was evenly divided between the Noblesse and Commons, though of course there were none of the Faust.

Together, they were the central figures of the Fourth based in Libelle.

Since they were having an emergency meeting, Manon had let them use a room in Libelle Castle, and the result was a boring conversation that had dragged on in front of her for longer than she could recall at this point. While she quietly battled her boredom, these full-grown adults continued their absurdly passionate conversation.

“We've already got one difficult person to deal with. And now Flarette is here on top of that? Why must they arrive now of all times? I've had enough of this mess...!”

“You mean that Princess Knight from our neighbors? True, the distribution of the monstine has been delayed because of her. What a difficult woman. Isn’t there anything we can do about her?”

“It seems she’s gathering young people in the port city on some silly whim, but we can’t let our guard down. That princess’s track record is the real deal. And she is a princess from another nation, after all. We can’t lay a hand on her.”

“Tch. These fools don’t understand the noble ideology of the Fourth!”

The Fourth, indeed.

The days of the continent-wide organization that had caused a massive uproar in the name of freedom and independence were long over. Without the powerful charisma of the Director, the group had scattered into small fragments. To the rest of the world, they were just the hollow remains of a terrorist organization that had taken protests too far.



As her presence at this meeting implied, Manon, too, was a member of the Fourth.

Her father, Count Libelle, had been providing them with financial support since the early days of the Fourth, so when he fell ill, attending the Fourth meetings became one of Manon's many duties. Since this meant she was under the surveillance of the Faust and the knights, it was an annoying inheritance to deal with.

And the current topic of argument was the priestess who had arrived in town just the other day.

"Curse that blasted Flare. Just when we thought she'd finally ceased her activities, she prepared an inconvenient little successor...!"

"She's called Flarette or something, right? What's she like?"

"Well, she brought down Archbishop Orwell. We can't take her lightly."

Flarette...the code name of one of the Faust's Executioners, who sought to cut down taboo entities. Unfortunately for her and her secretive duties, her existence was already becoming infamous enough that she might be recognized on the streets.

It was the death of Archbishop Orwell in the neighboring kingdom that started this.

The public was told she had died in battle against a monster, but in reality, she had been meddling in illegal activities, using citizens as her test subjects. It was a shocking revelation, especially since the archbishop was near the very top of the Faust. Even with their influence, it was impossible to completely cover up all the information.

Including the person who had executed the archbishop for her sins behind closed doors: Flarette.

Just as Flare's alias was widely known and feared far more than any Executioner should be, word of Flarette was starting to spread in certain circles.

"...Lady Manon. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

Manon had been concentrating all her efforts on staying awake, so she wasn't

prepared for the sudden question.

“Oh, er...”

They didn't notice that I was yawning, did they? Nervously, Manon peered at the asker's expression.

It was the old man who facilitated the meetings, but he didn't seem to have any particular expectations of her. That was only natural. Manon was nothing more than a little girl to them. Since they were all close family friends, they had known her since she was an infant.

What was really important to them was the opinion of Count Libelle, who was currently bedridden.

“Could we not monitor the activities of Princess Ashuna and Flarette and leave it at that for now? Maybe they'll move on without doing anything at all.”

Someone snorted.

Clearly, they all thought she was being naive. The others spoke up chidingly.

“Impossible, Lady Manon. Perhaps you're too young to be aware of this, but when Flare came to this town long ago, our losses were immeasurable!”

“Exactly. If that monster's apprentice is here, we must deal with her immediately.”

“Besides, Flare also brought down your mother, remember? This is the perfect chance to take revenge.”

“Although that was partly because she didn't use her best weapon when she had the chance...”

Manon's eye twitched at this last line.

However, the others just went on blathering without noticing her reaction.

“Besides, she's an assassin. Princess Ashuna is one thing, but in Flarette's case, the Faust won't be able to publicly find fault with us even if we attack her first.”

“Ah, I see. Pardon my ignorance. I am only here on my father's behalf, after all.”

Once she gave a listless response, they stopped bothering her.

Manon slumped into the back of her chair, having successfully evaded further argument. One way or another, she had fulfilled her duty of participating in the meeting. Now all she had to do was stay silent and hold off her sleepiness.

It wasn't as if she wanted to participate in this stupid meeting anyway. Dealing with the actions of the Fourth was just a bother to her.

But Manon was the only daughter of Count Libelle.

Anyone who was within the framework of the Noblesse was duty bound to get involved with the work of their organization. Especially in Manon's position.

How could anyone be free in a system like this?

The Fourth claimed to stand for freedom, but Manon couldn't bear the restraints and boredom of that round table. In that moment, she felt utterly foolish for not being able to get up and leave her seat, even if she thought the whole thing was a farce.

"All right, then it's decided."

While Manon was lost in thought, the group seemed to have reached an agreement.

The old man who generally ran the meetings imperiously announced their conclusion.

"We cannot allow any more delays in the distribution of monstine. We attack Flarette today. Lady Manon, is that all right with you?"

"Yes, that's fine. I'll make sure to tell my father about it, too."

He must have asked for confirmation because she didn't really say anything during the discussion. Manon forced a meek expression and nodded at the man. Privately, she was impressed with herself for not adding any snarky comments, like *I don't care*.

"I'm counting on you, Kaiser."

"We have every chance of winning, thanks to the strength our men have received from the monstine Lady Manon provided us."

“Ha-ha, of course. We’ll cut off Flare’s successor right here and now!”

The meeting seemed to have gotten them all worked up; it sounded like they really thought they could win. A particularly big and burly man at the Fourth’s table was planning to direct the attack himself.

As the other members cheered him on, the man looked at Manon proudly. What was his name again? It wasn’t worth the trouble to search her memories, so Manon just smiled back at him.

Whatever happened with the attack, it didn’t matter to her. Her growing hunger was far more important right now. Since the meeting had run long, she’d missed her chance to eat lunch.

There were some light refreshments provided at the meeting. The other members all dug in, but Manon had no desire to eat any of it.

“But we have no way of finding Flarette.”

“Hrmm, this is true.”

“We know her alias, but not her face or real name. And she’s an Executioner, too. Locating her will be difficult.”

They didn’t know her name, face, or location, yet they had decided to attack her? What a horrible plan. Sensing that they weren’t going to get anywhere, Manon decided to offer some information.

“I believe she’s at sea right now, actually.”

At that, all eyes of the Fourth gathered on Manon. She smiled back, unruffled.

“It seems she’s heading toward Pandemonium. If you keep close watch on the harbor, I imagine you’ll find her in no time. If you see a priestess coming back on a ship, then you’ll know that’s Flarette.”

One of the members looked at her searchingly.

“How do you know that, Lady Manon?”

“I have my ways of gathering information, too, you know.”

It wasn’t a lie.

But even if she told them the exact source of the information, they wouldn’t

believe her.

If she said she'd heard it from someone who personally saw the priestess approach the fog, then she would likely earn more laughs. Glancing at their expressions, she noted that while they didn't all appear completely cleared of doubt, it seemed like they were convinced enough not to press her further.

"And you're certain this information is accurate?"

"Yes, quite so. It comes from a very trustworthy friend of mine. And it may also interest you to hear that this 'Flurette' evidently has a lost one with her, too."

"What?!"

Hearing that the Executioner was accompanied by someone with a Pure Concept, the others all grew excited.

"If she has a lost one with her, that's all the more reason we can't let her be."

"This is the perfect chance to kill Flurette and steal her companion."

"We know where she is now, too, thanks to Lady Manon. We should go attack her right away!"

The conversation, so close to ending before, now grew heated again. The man who'd been chosen to lead the attack was the subject of many high expectations. The food that had been brought to the round table was quickly consumed, and still the discussion continued.

Manon, who had been hoping that the meeting was about to end, softly clutched her empty stomach. An immodest growl emitted from underneath her hand, but it was lost among the voices of the arguing members, so it appeared that no one had heard it.

No, there might be one person who did.

Her new friend who was lending her power might have heard the sound. She thought she heard a little giggle coming from somewhere within her after the growl of her stomach.

Well, that was embarrassing. Manon's lips pouted. And there was only one cause to blame.

“It’s all that Flarette and her lost one’s fault.”

Muttering quietly to herself, Manon resolved that she would go buy some snacks in the city market once this meeting was finally over.

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Release [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

When Akari opened her eyes, all she saw was pure white.

She sat up, and that movement alone made the surface she’d been lying on shake. She was sprawled out on a small boat.

“Aaah...”

Yawning in a very unladylike manner, she stretched out her arms and legs. Then she looked around, but she couldn’t see anything. The air around her was so white that it was impossible to tell what her surroundings were.

The thick mist roiled and shifted constantly, but there were never any gaps in it. It was so dense that there was no space for anything but more alabaster. Creepy noises echoed in the blinding fog. Her vision was obscured by it.

If she had awoken like this, it meant that certain conditions had been met. Fully awake for the first time in two weeks, Akari sorted through her memories.

The attitude Akari showed now was a stark contrast to the girl Menou knew. She was clearly in a strange predicament, yet she showed no signs of being flustered. Her calm demeanor made it seem almost as if she already had a complete understanding of her current situation.

And indeed, this Akari really did understand exactly what was happening.

“This must be Libelle, huh?”

The small boat carrying Akari bumped into something and stopped.

What she was floating on right now wasn’t actually the sea. It was difficult to tell in the fog, but the boat was actually on an ocean-sized accumulation of blood and flesh.

Truly, it was a horrific place. If she didn’t have a clue as to what was happening, no doubt her sanity would be draining away by the second. If

anything, the fact that she couldn't see was actually a blessing.

For she was in the middle of Pandemonium.

Akari wrinkled her nose at the smell of blood, but she had been here so many times that she was still relaxed.

"If I'm here now, that means things are going according to plan. I'm glad it's gone well so far!"

Knowing exactly where she was and what was happening to her right now, she blithely twirled the ribbon of her headband as she talked to herself.

"So we made it to Libelle—that's a relief. Now we just—wah?!"

That last shriek was owing to the fact that the boat had suddenly tipped upward.

In the next moment, Akari was sent flying into the air. Something had risen out of the sea of blood and attacked, sending her shooting upward, boat and all.

It was a giant monster, so large that only part of it was visible at such close range. It would be impossible to even calculate the size of its enormous, wide-open mouth, let alone the rest of its massive body.

"Hrmm. Sorry, Menou."

Watching the maw come toward her, Akari clutched the headband to her chest so she wouldn't drop it and shrugged.

If she was in the fog, that meant the journey was going just as she expected so far. She had already experienced everything that would happen here, too.

Which was how she knew this couldn't possibly be the end.

"I can't die here, either."

Akari's body was swallowed up into the gigantic mouth.

The place where Menou was standing swayed slowly.

Balancing on the rocking ship, Menou gazed at the fog.

She was at the prow of a small ship with a Guiding engine. Acquiring the

vessel had gone smoothly: When she made the request to Sicilia, she agreed to lend her one even more easily than Menou had expected.

A mass of fog was ensconced over the surface of the blue sea, so dense it gave the illusion that a cumulonimbus cloud was sitting atop the ocean. If one gazed too long at the mist, it would be all too easy to lose one's sense of distance and stumble right into it.

This was Pandemonium.

A giant fog that completely swallowed up the place where the Alliance of Southern Islands once existed. It was the quietest of the sites of the Four Major Human Errors.

But it only seemed quiet when observed from the outside.

The originator of monsters. The apex of demons. The lord of all evils, and a most despicable creature that sought to devour the world. One little girl's wild fantasy had been materialized by a terrifying Pure Concept, and here was the ruin that resulted.

Sealed inside this fog was the lone girl who had brought the Concept of Original Sin into this world.

The only records that remained were akin to legend, but it was said that even a monster massive enough to consume entire islands obeyed her and wreaked havoc on the world. The barrier of the fog was the only way to keep the swarms of monsters in check, and so it was spread across a wide area.

And Menou had just sent Akari right into the middle of it.

It was not long after they set out to sea in the ship. Menou gave Akari a sleep-inducing drug, telling her it was to prevent seasickness, and soon she was sound asleep. Then Menou brought their ship as close to Pandemonium as possible before putting Akari on a lifeboat and letting it drift into the fog.

"Now...let's see what happens," Menou murmured to herself.

It was said that once someone went into the fog, they could never escape. It was simple enough to enter from the outside, but the barrier kept things from getting out. Thus, Menou hypothesized that perhaps even Akari, who had the

power to turn back time and revive herself, might not be able to escape if she was sealed inside.

But..., a voice in the back of her mind objected. *What if Akari has already come back from the future?*

“.....”

It was a theory she'd started forming after the incident in Garm: Menou had failed somehow at executing Akari, and she regressed time for the entire world.

If they were going to head toward the holy land, it was inevitable that they would pass through Libelle. And once they were in Libelle, there was no way it wouldn't occur to Menou to trap Akari in the fog. The idea of getting rid of Akari by way of Pandemonium was an inevitability on this journey. But if this method of killing her actually worked, then there should be no way for Akari to then use *Regression* to turn back time.

She had wondered if something unexpected would happen right as she was about to send Akari into the fog, but it proceeded smoothly, without incident.

So when Guiding Light flashed on the ship where Menou stood, she was already half expecting it.

Guiding Force: Connect—NT?i?KC, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression]

The light sparkled in the air and danced into the shape of a clock. She had seen this phenomenon once before. As Menou watched, the light scattered, and a girl appeared from its midst.

As she emerged from nothingness, the girl promptly whacked her forehead.

“Ow?!” She let out a frantic wail.

Looking at the girl who hadn't been on this ship just seconds before, Menou heaved a sigh.

“H-huh? Wasn't I sleeping in the cabin?”

“You got up half-asleep and hit your head. A shameful display, really.”

“O-oh, okay.” Looking around and blinking, Akari accepted this explanation. “Ahhh. I sure slept like a baby.”

“I’ve never seen anyone sleep for so long just from a drug for motion sickness before.”

Once again, Akari didn’t seem to think Menou had tried to kill her. Maybe she had died in the fog without even waking up.

Menou quickly ended the conversation and guided her back to the cabin. It was doubtful that Akari of all people would notice, but on the off chance that she asked why the lifeboat was missing, it would be annoying to have to come up with an excuse.

“We’d better head back to the harbor. Too much time in the sea breeze is bad for your hair.”

“Kaaay. We wouldn’t want your pretty hair to get all dried out, Menou!”

Pandemonium.

She had thought it would be a fairly effective method of execution, but Akari came back from the dead. Since *Regression* was such a highly conceptual power, it was able to ensure that she revived in a safe place with her body sound and healthy.

A safe place... Meaning that right now, Akari considered Menou’s side the safest place she could be.

“.....”

Menou had been fearful of Akari’s powers growing.

Pure Concepts gradually ate away at their users. As the Guiding Force closest to pure truth in this world, they changed even the person using them to be closer to their concept.

Those who became Human Errors lost their own personalities entirely and acted purely in accordance with their respective Concepts, to disastrous results.

The most obvious form of compensation was memories.

When Otherworlders like Akari used Guiding Force, they lost their memories. Guiding Force drew power from the user’s soul and controlled it using their spirit. Normally, the power of a soul would belong to the user, with nothing lost. People who were born with a lot of Guiding Force were often in danger of

their spirits becoming off-balance, but that was easily regulated with training. Momo was one such example.

But the Pure Concepts which attached to the souls of Otherworlders when they were summoned were not that person's power at all.

The power produced by a Pure Concept was stronger than any one individual should be, and always with a specific purpose. Since these Pure Concepts were a foreign substance, they naturally overrode any control from the host's spirit.

As a result, using Guiding Force by way of a Pure Concept inevitably involved expelling the memories and personality of the soul as if they were foreign matter. The purity of the power would increase each time, until finally, the unwritten rules of the Pure Concept within that person's soul became their sole guiding principle and motivation.

As Menou gazed at Akari's back, she murmured to herself. "...It's fine for now, I'm sure."

Was her fear only that the Pure Concept would grow in power? Or was she more afraid of something else?

"Hmm? What's fine, Menou?"

"I've been worried about it since I saw you in the bath, but... I just checked, and you haven't gotten pudgy yet. You're fine for now, Akari."

"Excuse me?! What do you mean, 'for now'?!"

Menou herself still wasn't aware of her own inner discord.

It was more than just disappointment she'd felt when she failed to execute Akari. When the Guiding Force lit the ship, there was a bit of relief mingled in her expression. And the ache she felt in her chest when she cast Akari out to sea in the first place was beginning to be more than simple guilt.

It was a far more complicated, yet in some ways simpler, an utterly natural emotion.

I don't want to do this.

Deep down, Menou was experiencing the same feeling she'd once sensed from the other kids at the monastery.

The ship carried the pair of them back to the harbor.

Menou operated the small Guiding engine-propelled ship. The basics of steering such a vessel were among the many lessons she'd had drilled into her at the monastery.

The vessel left a glittering trail of Guiding Light in the water. Akari was leaning over the side to watch this, so Menou kept an eye on her in case she fell.

"Ah! I see the harbor!"

"Yes, I know. Just stop leaning over the side. It reminds me of the time I almost drowned."

"Huh? You've fallen into the ocean before, Menou?"

"Yes, I visited this city when I was little."

Dragging Akari away from the side, Menou turned her gaze back toward the harbor.

Nearly a hundred ships of all shapes and sizes were docked there. Most were fishing vessels. The reason the sizes tended toward the smaller end was likely because they couldn't sail out to the open ocean due to Pandemonium.

Akari didn't end up falling into the water, and they made it back to the harbor safely.

"Land is so stable!" Akari shouted.

Even without Akari's frolicking, Menou sensed eyes on them as soon as they set foot back in the harbor. She checked her surroundings discreetly, without moving her head.

Something strange was going on in the crowd.

They weren't knights; their stares were too blatant. A proper knight would be a bit more tactful about watching a suspect. And there was little reason for knights to keep an eye on Menou, anyway.

Which left only a few possibilities.

"...It must be the Fourth."

Menou walked by Akari's side, not letting any reaction show.

As they proceeded from the wharf along the waterfront, voices soon came into earshot.

“Ooh!” Akari’s face shone.

The footsteps of people weaving between the lines of stalls, the couples sitting on benches and chatting, the cries of hawkers, and other noises mixed together to form a continuous roar.

“It’s so lively!”

“Yes, well, this *is* the market. It’s probably the most crowded part of the city.”

Akari’s excitement was in no way marred by Menou’s calm explanation.

They were visiting the open-air market adjoined to the harbor. It was close enough to the ocean to hear the crashing waves and was crammed with street stalls.

This bustling marketplace supported the everyday lives of the people.

There were countless kinds of products for sale. Most common by far was seafood; the smell of fresh fish was stronger the closer one got to the seaside. The next most popular were fruits and vegetables, but if one looked at the stalls closer inland, there were many other necessities for sale as well. Other stalls sold secondhand clothes and accessories, and there were even some sketchier stalls that sold conjuring materials or Guiding vessels engraved with simple crests.

Since Libelle was bordered by the Wild Frontier, adventurers sometimes brought in materials and ancient relics to sell. Looking around the street, there were people who seemed to be adventurers. This was probably the sort of place where Momo had sold the relics she found, too.

Before long, Akari gave in to temptation and bought some fruit. She seemed to have gotten used to the local currency by now and handed over a hundred-*in* coin like she was used to it.

“Okay, Menou. Say ‘ahhh’!”

“Hyah.”

“Oomph?! ”

Menou stole the fruit Akari had jokingly pressed close to her mouth and shoved it into Akari's instead. Akari's eyes widened, but instead of panicking, she just chewed on it gleefully.

"What is this? It's sooo good!"

"It's watermelon. Nice and sweet, isn't it? They're in season right now."

"Wait, really? It's a different color from the watermelon I know, and it doesn't have seeds... Isn't this more like muskmelon? Oh, but now that you mention it, the taste is kinda similar."

"Is that right?"

Akari was still voicing her needlessly specific assessment when it all went down.

A large, burly man came walking toward them.

At first, there was nothing unusual about it. He didn't seem to be paying any attention to Akari. The street was crowded, so he was just one of many people walking through the market.

But something about him put Menou on alert.

The movement of his eyes, his gait, the way he kept his right hand in his breast pocket like he was hiding something. And most of all, it was obvious that he was very aware of Menou, too.

This must be him. Menou walked past the likely assailant, still acting perfectly casual.

At the same time, she sensed the construction of a conjuring behind her.

"Akari, get down."

"Bwuh?" Akari stared blankly, her cheeks still stuffed with fruit as she failed to respond to Menou's sharp warning.

Guiding Force: Connect—Ring, Crest—Invoke [Flame Shot]

A ball of flame whizzed toward Menou's back.

It was slow. The construction was sloppy. Low power, too. And virtually no stealth to speak of. Overall, it was a shoddy excuse for a crest conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

The flame was easily dispersed by Menou's barrier.

"Tch!"

Seeing that his surprise attack had failed, the man pulled out a knife. He wasn't alone, either—several other people stepped out from his shadow.

If that crest conjuring was their best effort, then Menou doubted they could harm her, no matter how many attacks they tried, but it would be troublesome if they caused any damage or injury to others.

"H-huh?! What's going on?! Menou!"

"Calm down, Akari. I can't believe they'd attack us in broad daylight in the midst of all these people, though..."

The group standing in front of them must be members of the Fourth.

If they were attacking right now, that meant they knew exactly where to find Menou, and who she really was.

A traitor? she thought at first, then shook her head.

If anything, there was a good chance Menou herself was the problem. The incident in Garm had drawn far too much attention to her. If they narrowed things down from that information, it wouldn't be impossible to locate her.

The execution of a significant figure like Orwell was a major incident in Grisarika Kingdom. Add in the fact that she was the apprentice of the infamous Flare, and it might be enough to shift her position from an ordinary Executioner to a subject of serious interest.

"...This will make things difficult."

The crowds surrounding them were standing stock-still, their eyes on Menou. It was so sudden that they didn't understand what had happened.

Depending on how she dealt with this, it was all too clear that they were seconds away from breaking out in a panic. So Menou raised her voice clearly.

"Please remain calm. Stay where you are and get down!"

The reason the crowds obeyed Menou's warning was because they inherently

trusted the Faust. Only those who had been trained and carefully selected could join this estate. As a result, ordinary citizens had faith in priestesses.

Upon hearing the voice of someone in a priestess robe, the onlookers still seemed nervous, but they managed to stay calm. Once Menou saw this, she reached into the slit in her skirt and pulled out the dagger concealed on the inside of the belt strapped around her thigh.

Using a conjuring too stealthy for the men to notice, she carefully charged her dagger with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

“Akari, you get down, too. Here, hold this.”

“Wha—?”

Menou passed her dagger to the dazed-looking Akari, sheath and all. She doubted the other girl knew how to use it, but it was perfect for self-defense. With the Guiding Thread still attached to the hilt, Menou left Akari where she was and broke into a run. Their assailants were using tactics that could easily harm passersby. She had to knock them all out before anyone was injured.

Menou’s entire body glowed with Guiding Light.

After one step, she launched off the ground. She gave no warning. There was no need to take such considerations for terrorists. The attackers panicked at the unexpected movement and started to construct conjurings, but it was pointless. She landed in front of the men before they could invoke their attacks.

“Ngh!”

Menou went for her first target. She drove her fist into his solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. In moments, he would be on his knees, vomiting—or so Menou thought.

But instead, his eyes glittered with rage.

“Hmm?”

The man counterattacked. He thrust with a knife, covering his pain with ire.

This level of toughness seemed downright unnatural. He wasn’t using Guiding

Enhancement, yet his movements were incredibly fast. Suspicious, Menou knocked away the knife with her left hand and pushed closer, sweeping the man's legs.

Once they were in point-blank range, the man went down so quickly it was almost amusing. As he lost his balance and tumbled through the air, she grabbed him by the collar and flung him toward the other attacker who was charging toward her from behind.

As the pair went down in a mess of flailing limbs, Menou was already targeting her next prey.

"Dammit! You little—gah!"

That made three. Interrupting the man's roar with a roundhouse kick, Menou easily sent him flying. The slit of her skirt fluttered, revealing a glimpse of the boot-clad limbs beneath. But though her legs were shapely, they were also strong enough to knock out most men in a single blow.

Her skirt swished back into place. Even as she crushed the enemy with martial arts, Menou furrowed her brow.

She had intended to snap a bone or two for the man's troubles, but judging by the sensation through her boot, her kick hadn't even made a crack. This was all seeming stranger by the moment.

"That's enough of that."

Hearing a voice behind her, Menou turned around slowly.

"Don't move, Flurette. Unless you don't care what happens to your friend here."

This was the man who had first attacked Menou with shoddy conjuring. The tip of his knife was pressed against Akari's throat; he must have grabbed her while Menou was fighting.

"M-Menou... A-are these people after *me*...?"

So she *was* listening when Menou lectured her in the bathhouse the day before after all. Akari did have the dagger Menou had given her, but of course she didn't know how to use it.

This was now, by all appearances, a hostage situation. The man holding a knife to Akari's neck smirked triumphantly, certain of his victory.

"You put up quite a fight—I guess we should've expected that from Flare's successor... Hey now, no funny business, or someone's gonna die."

Noticing Menou's twitch toward movement, the man once again used Akari as a shield.

The men who Menou had knocked out before were already standing up, too. They had taken too much damage to recover that easily, but they were strangely resilient.

"You all seem to be very tough... Are you using that 'monstrine'?"

"That's right. Amazing, isn't it?"

So their durability was an effect of the drug, although they didn't even seem aware they were dabbling in a dangerous substance. Ignoring the man's bragging, Menou estimated it was probably around the same potency as Guiding Enhancement used by a third-rate adventurer.

"How troublesome... And how did you know who I am, exactly?"

The enemy clearly had confidence that their information about Menou was correct. Rather than try to deceive them, she decided it was better to ask outright, relying on the man's obvious pridefulness for an answer.

Sure enough, he fell for it. Grinning smugly, he was all too quick to show his organization's hand.

"Word's gotten around about that whole uproar in the next nation over, you know. We heard you went head-to-head against some of our comrades in Grisarika Kingdom, too. You're the one who stopped us from getting our leader back, aren't you?"

Just as Menou suspected, it was the Orwell incident. To make matters worse, it sounded like they'd also gotten some information from the group that hijacked the train to Garm. They were all part of the Fourth, even if they were from different nations.

"Executioner or not, you're still part of the Faust. No way you'd be able to

abandon a hostage in front of all these people. Besides, this one's important to you, isn't she?"

Judging by his attitude, Menou suspected he might even know Akari's nature, too. Trying to feel out the enemy organization's tactics, she decided to feign nervousness and continue questioning him a little longer.

"What are you after?"

"It's simple. We want to eliminate you, Flarete. And we'll be taking this one while we're at it, too."

So they even knew that Akari was an Otherworlder, just as Menou feared.

This was far too big of an information leak. For a moment, Menou let her shoulders sag.

Taking this as a sign of defeat, the man grinned even wider. But of course, Menou had no intention of giving up. And the actions of a group like this were beyond predictable.

It had all unfolded exactly as she expected, right down to Akari being taken hostage.

"Well, now I have more questions. I'll be sure to ask the knights to thoroughly interrogate you."

"...Do you realize what kind of position you're in right now?"

"Oh yes. And I hate to tell you, but that idiot there was just a decoy."

"Huh?"

The man looked doubtful. Shaking her head at his utter obliviousness, Menou let power flow into the Guiding Thread she was still maintaining.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Thread)—Dagger, Crest—Remote Invoke [Gale]

The *Gale* blew out of the dagger in Akari's hands.

"Ungh?!"

The sudden blast of wind sent the man threatening Akari reeling with surprise.

He hadn't noticed Menou preparing this attack, so he was caught off guard by the wind, unable to resist as it blew him backward. The group of attackers hadn't even noticed that Menou was still holding on to the Guiding Thread as she fought, although it helped that she had concealed it with Guiding Camouflage.

There was no way such pathetic tacticians could get the jump on Menou. As the man lost his balance, Menou slipped among their ranks. She used the Guiding Thread pulled behind her to bind the men, rendering them immobile and toppling them to the ground.

"Amazing, Menou! I knew you could do it."

"But of course. I'm a pure, proper, and powerful priestess, after all!"

Freed from her captor, Akari dashed over to Menou, who smiled proudly. They were in public. To reassure the crowd around them, she rather deliberately pointed out her own virtues.

Menou had moved away from Akari during the battle *because* she knew the girl would almost certainly be taken hostage. The enemy would let down their guard once they thought they had the upper hand, allowing her to win easily with the right preparations.

Someone in the market must have called for help: Knights came running up belatedly and took the men into custody.

"So that was monstine...", Menou murmured to herself.

It would take a fair amount of knowledge and skill to produce a strengthening drug like that. It was all too clear to her now that she'd faced off against people who were under its influence.

Manon Libelle... She might be even more of a threat than I thought.

Manon pressed a hand over her pounding heart after the uproar that had just occurred.

"My, that startled me..."

She had gone to the market to buy some snacks after that awfully dull meeting, only to happen upon the very attack they'd just been discussing.

As always, they were quick to act only at the most inopportune of times, seeing how they'd launched the attack right after the meeting ended. Even Manon had to admit that she had probably been tuning out the conversation a little too much.

"So that's Flurette?"

She stared at the priestess fixedly from afar. She was a lovely young woman with her light-tawny hair pulled back by a big scarf ribbon. The slit in her priestess robes' skirt allowed for an enchanting glimpse of her long legs.

Manon wasn't the only one staring at her. After that commotion, a whole crowd was gaping with open curiosity. If anything, that helped make Manon's stare seem more natural.

She had heard her name, too. The lost lamb girl had called her Menou.

"Ms. Menou, is it? It seems unfair for a pretty girl to be so strong."

Manon ordered fruit from a nearby stall. It was a hundred *in* per slice, which seemed a reasonable amount.

Menou, Flare's successor, left with her companion to bring in the captured men with the knights.

The failed attackers were being dragged along by the knights. They would probably be interrogated at the station. These men had no fortitude to speak of; no doubt they would spill all kinds of secrets.

Before she bit into the fruit, Manon paused in thought.

She could let them go, but it would be less than ideal for any extra information to be made public. More importantly, Manon had her own reasons to sentence the men to death.

"That's the one who spoke ill of Mother at today's meeting, isn't it?"

Manon produced a red pill from her sleeve. Fortunately for her, the men were all under the influence of monstine. There were any number of ways to deal with them.

Manon's mother was killed by Flare, just as they had mentioned at the Fourth meeting. The reason was simple: Her mother was a lost one with a Pure

Concept.

The pill rolling around in her palm glowed red.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [The child is hungry.]

The pill in Manon's hand was offered up as a sacrifice.

It interfered with the drug that was already melded into their bodies and invoked a conjuring.

Behind her, there was a sudden commotion. The captured men were struggling. No, it was more than just a struggle.

"Hey, calm down—wait, wh-what's happening to them?!"

The men's bodies were undergoing transformations. The monstine they'd absorbed had spread its roots inside them, and now it was suddenly eroding their body tissue and changing their form. Their hands and feet morphed into sharp claws, and their hair fused into their skin and hardened.

"They're turning into monsters...!"

The captives that had once been men were reborn as monsters.

There were screams and cries from the crowd as they witnessed the unthinkable. It was an uproar far more riotous than the attack that had occurred before. The newly transformed monsters had shaken off their bonds and were attacking indiscriminately.

This time, it was all just as expected. Manon paid them no mind as she bit into her fruit.

Crunch. Its juices burst into her mouth.

"Mmm, delicious."

Manon walked away, enjoying her snack, while behind her, the men who had transformed into monsters and started rampaging were defeated by the knights.



Young Menou gazed out at the waterfront.

The red-haired priestess had left Menou to wait at the harbor while she checked on something. Alone, Menou gazed out at the water, never tiring of the sound of the waves crashing on the beach and drawing back.

Big, constantly moving, vast beyond belief. Staring at the ocean made Menou feel like she might be sucked out to sea, and like if she were, she might melt away to nothing.

“I’m done. Let’s get back to the hotel.”

“...Sheesh, you’re a boring one.”

For whatever reason, Menou remembered their conversation right before entering the city.

Without a word, she jumped into the ocean.

“Huh?”

Behind her, she heard a gasp of disbelief. Then there was a loud splash, and she couldn’t hear anything else.

A world of water.

Her eyes still open, Menou began to sink, letting out a trail of bubbles. The surface of the water sparkled beautifully. As she stared up at it, an arm suddenly burst through and grabbed her.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The red-haired priestess had yanked Menou out. Thoroughly drenched, Menou let out a sneeze. The weather was far from warm, and the sea breeze chilled her small frame to the bone.

“Um.”

“What is it?”

“The ocean is...so salty.”

“.....” The priestess’s expression was indescribable. Menou didn’t let that stop her from explaining her impressions of the ocean.

“And also, the waves go...zwooosh. They’re very...loud. And it’s also sparkly and pretty...”

“Who cares? Enough. Zip it.” Menou’s Master cut her off brusquely. “We’re going to the bathhouse. It’ll be so annoying if you catch a cold.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Menou nodded. Then she noticed the smell of blood.

It was coming off the red-haired priestess. If she had noticed, then undoubtedly the priestess had noticed, too.

Her mentor spoke without looking back. “I’m a villain, remember?”

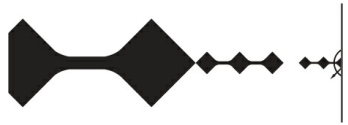
Even as a child, Menou could guess that she had just killed someone. That was why she left Menou to wait at the harbor.

But that didn’t really mean anything.

What should she think about murder? Menou’s heart was still too blanched white to form words to describe her feelings.

Menou clutched her mentor’s robes and walked along beside her.

The taboo entity Master had killed that day was none other than the mother of Manon Libelle.



Scattered Sparks at the Evening Ball



Gasping for air, Menou quickly threw off the covers.

She was a trained Executioner. Even if she was in a state of deep sleep, she could be wide awake the moment she sensed danger.

She felt like she had been dreaming about the past, but the last traces of her dreams were chased out of her mind by reality. She rolled to the side and dropped off the edge of the bed. In the half second it took to fall, she caught herself with one hand to reduce the impact and landed nimbly on both feet.

Did something just attack me? She looked up at her bed and froze in astonishment.

Something heavy had just landed where Menou was sleeping moments before.

It was Akari, bouncing on the spring bed.

“Aw, you dodged me. Good morniiiing, Menou!”

What is she trying to do? Having dived onto the bed where Menou was sleeping, Akari sat up and waved cheerfully.

Menou, who was still in a battle-ready stance on the floor, let out a sigh and straightened up. She’d gotten into combat mode for no reason. Her shoulders sagged, and she glared at Akari.

“What was that for, Akari? Were you planning on crushing me under the extra weight you’ve put on?”

“Wait, what?! That came from nowhere! I haven’t put on weight! ...O-or have I?”

“I’m not going to tell you. It’s important to be self-aware.”

“Whaaaa—?!”

Menou kept her voice cool. If anything came from nowhere, it was the surprise assault.

She'd been attacked suddenly in her sleep. Why wouldn't she be a little miffed? Turning away with a “hmph,” she started to get herself ready, washing her face and changing into her priestess robes. This hotel didn't have any scales or anything, of course. The only point of comparison on a journey like this was your own self from the day before.

While Menou changed clothes and put her hair up with the scarf ribbon, Akari pinched her own stomach nervously and heaved a sigh of relief.

“I'm totally fine. D-don't tease me like that! You weren't waking up, so I figured I'd help you out, that's all.”

“And you couldn't think of a better way to do that?”

“I just got carried away with my feelings for y—ow?!”

She was wearing a meek expression for someone confessing criminal intent. Menou had decided not to forgive her, so she administered retribution in the form of a forehead flick.

Akari clutched her head tearfully and flashed her a reproachful look.

“Wehhh... I thought it was kind of weird, though. You never sleep in.”

“...That's true.” Menou had a lot to think about the night before.

From what she'd heard afterward, the men she had handed over to the knights the day before suddenly turned into monsters and went wild. Fortunately, the knights were able to take them down before there were any casualties, but that wasn't the problem.

“This job is shaping up to be more of a pain than I expected.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I'm investigating this dangerous drug called monstine, you see... Listen, Akari. If a stranger gives you a red pill, make sure you don't swallow it, all right?”

“Even I wouldn’t take something that sketchy...”

It was safe to assume the men’s transformation into monsters was due to the monstine.

One dangerous property of Original Sin was its ability to erode and take over other material. In other words, if one could turn the Concept of Original Sin into a pill form, then it would be possible to turn anyone who consumed it into a monster.

Users of monstine weren’t really being strengthened physically. Their physical forms were changing from human to monster, and the strengthening was merely a result of that.

So the Fourth wasn’t really using monstine to try to raise money. By circulating it throughout the city, they could transform the innocent people who consumed it into monsters and commit terrorism on a massive scale. This drug was very dangerous indeed.

That explained why there were so many monsters appearing in Libelle lately. When Menou had reported this to Sicilia, she immediately began investigating the state of monstine distribution and started apprehending anyone who had taken the drug. Fortunately, it hadn’t really reached the actual port yet, but there was still plenty of cause for concern.

The scale of this incident was becoming much larger than they had initially imagined.

“At any rate, I have a lot more work to do.”

“Hmm?” Akari simply tilted her head in curiosity.

“What’s the meaning of this, Lady Manon?”

At the start of the latest emergency meeting, which had been held daily since Flarete’s arrival, Manon was immediately accused by the other members of the Fourth.

Usually, they only treated her presence as a formality, but now all of them were staring at her. Manon blinked at the unusual turn of events.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The attack, obviously! The failure was unfortunate, but...why did they turn into monsters, including Kaiser?!”

“Kaiser...?” Manon’s brows drew together in concentration for a moment as she searched through her memories.

Kaiser. Who was that, again? The name did sound familiar. It definitely wasn’t anyone important, but she suspected it wasn’t a complete stranger, either.

After turning the name over in her head a few times, she managed to bring up the memory.

“Ah, yes, Kaiser. Mr. Kaiser, was it? Yes, I remember now.” She lightly clapped her hands together in recollection.

It was that large-built man whom Manon turned into a monster yesterday afternoon when his surprise attack failed. The whole thing was so unimportant that she’d forgotten all about it.

Pleased with herself for remembering, Manon pressed her palms together and smiled.

“I just happened to be passing by, that’s all.”

“Passing by, you say...?”

“Oh, yes. I was coincidentally in the area during the attack. It would be troublesome for all of you if Mr. Kaiser spilled valuable information, wouldn’t it? So, as a member of the Fourth myself, I decided to take preventative measures. Flurette was there, too, so I thought it best to deal with things promptly.”

Manon smiled, and the other executives of the Fourth were stunned into silence.

Their expressions weren’t finding fault with Manon, exactly. They seemed to be trying and failing to figure out how best to approach her.

“Lady Manon. You are the one who first proposed the distribution of monstine. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Monstrine is incredibly addictive, and its users feel euphoric. That’s what you told us when you brought in the Guiding vessel with which to produce it.”

“Yes. The drug we’ve been distributing has been adapted to have those effects, so it works just as described.”

“Distributing it throughout the city will give us access to capital. And if necessary, we can use the citizens who have taken monstrine as hostages to hold off the Faust. As an absolute last resort, we can turn them into monsters to increase our number of pawns and use them to fight the Faust and the knights head-on. Isn’t that what you told us?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

Everyone here had been taking the young Manon more than a little bit lightly. The Fourth in Libelle, after all, were primarily friends and relatives of the house of Libelle. Since they had known Manon since infancy, and she showed no signs of taking the meetings seriously, they naturally looked down on her.

But now, all that had changed.

“Then why did Kaiser turn into a monster?! It doesn’t make sense!”

“Ahh, I see what you’re trying to say.”

Of course, the leaders currently present all knew the risks of monstrine, while it might not have been clear to the lesser members of the Fourth. Consuming it would give the user a muscular body and sense of omnipotence, but that was just a side effect of their slow physical transformation into monsters. If one knew the eventual fate of monstrine users, they would obviously never use the drug themselves.

So why had one of the leaders transformed into a monster?

The reason was simple. Manon pointed at the food on the table with her fan.

“I laced this food with monstrine.”

This was one of the reasons they had reached such an irrational conclusion at yesterday’s meeting.

The others had all taken monstrine by way of the food here. The resulting intoxication and inflated sense of power was what led them to decide on such a

reckless attack and act on it immediately.

Angry shouting filled the room.

After all, Kaiser had turned into a monster, gone on a violent rampage, and gotten put down by the knights. On top of unmistakably declaring that she was the one who turned him into a monster, Manon had just revealed that all of them had taken the drug, too. The terrifying realization that any one of them could turn into a monster was now running through them.

“Damn you! What the hell are you thinking?!”

Manon’s calm smile was unchanged.

“Quiet down, please.” She produced a red pill from her sleeve.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Tangled-up jump rope]

The red pill vanished from Manon’s palm.

“What?!”

This time, there were cries of shock.

One of the members seated at the round table—a woman—had her arms twisted out of shape. Bones cracked. Her joints bent at seemingly impossible angles. Like rope that had gotten knotted together, her arms moved unnaturally and began to slowly wind around the woman’s own neck.

She tried to resist, but it was her own arms that were strangling her. Out of sheer desperation, she raised her feet and tried to fit them between her neck and her arms. As she curled up and flailed her legs, she looked very much like an ant struggling not to drown.

“Ah...brghh...”

Finally, the woman suffocated and stopped moving entirely.

“Now, are there any other complaints?”

The meeting room fell deathly silent.

But one brave old man turned a hateful gaze on Manon.

“How dare you! You’re just a failure who couldn’t even inherit your mother’s power... Was it your doing that Count Libelle is bedridden, too?!”

“...How rude. I am still a perfectly dutiful daughter, you know.” Manon shrugged. “It’s simple, really. I was asked to spread the monstine in exchange for borrowing power to exact my revenge, so I wanted to have as many people consume it as possible.”

“Revenge, you say?” The old man’s face twisted in surprise. “But Count Libelle would never... Wait. Don’t tell me you sold the Fourth into the hands of an outsider?!”

“Sold you...? Who in the world would be so generous as to buy such a worthless organization?” Manon shook her head in disbelief that the members of the Fourth still considered themselves so valuable. “This was my own decision.”

“Balderdash! As if one little girl like you could cause such a massive upheaval on your own! Who’s really behind this?!”

The old man grew even more heated.

He was surprisingly close to the truth, but completely off the mark at the same time.

“Flarette is here...the apprentice of Flare, who took my mother’s life. That awful woman who killed her because she was a lost one... As a daughter, it’s only human nature that I should want to respond accordingly, isn’t it?”

Staring levelly at the pallid members, Manon continued indifferently.

“And so I’ve made certain arrangements for the ball taking place tomorrow evening at Libelle Castle. Do be sure to attend.”

She didn’t care what any of them thought.

This revenge was Manon’s desire, and hers alone.

The evening sunlight cast a deep red over the landscape.

In this port city, the wind changed based on the time of day. In the evening, it died down to a light breeze toward the sea. In a dark alley between the long shadows of two buildings, a spray of fresh blood jetted through the air.

“Gah!”

This fearful cry came from a youngster in his late teens.

These youths were delinquents of Libelle, boastful boys who thought themselves the strongest fighters in the world. Finding the peaceful life too boring, they banded together in search of cheap thrills and excitement, committing wicked acts whenever they could escape the watchful eyes of the knights and priestesses.

Truth be told, they were the epitome of youthful indiscretion. And while normally they were full of baseless confidence and swagger, in this moment, all of them were dripping with blood, faces filled with fear.

Standing before them was a girl whose adorableness was completely out of place.

Her pink hair was tied in two pigtails with matching scrunchies. Short-statured and clad in a white priestess robe, she addressed the young men in a light drawl.

“Won’t you just confess already?”

This girl was fundamentally different from the priestesses they knew. She was violent without a hint of hesitation. There was no mercy or compassion in her voice. And most of all, the weapon she wielded was indescribably nasty.

It was a coping saw.

The young men already had lacerations all over. The wounds weren’t particularly deep; it would be difficult to inflict serious damage just by swinging the thin, flexible blade.

But it didn’t change the fact that they were very painful.

Since the weapon was intended for sawing away at things, not cutting them, it caused a dull ache that tormented the brain. Usually, a fight would give these young men a little bit of excitement, but the pain from her coping saw was quick to crush their desire for battle.

“Wh-what do you mean, ‘confess’? Who the hell are you?!”

“I thought I already explained this to you...” Rolling her eyes at the flustered

teens, she irritably explained her purpose. “I’m looking for the Fourth who live in this city. The dregs of society must take or at least carry that so-called monstine drug, riiight? Hurry up and spit out all the information you have, you talking guinea pigs.”

“I—I dunno what you’re talking about!”

“No lying, please.” Momo narrowed her eyes and swung the coping saw. Its sharp whine as it cut through the air made several of the boys tremble.

Though their wounds were shallow, the feeling of a saw blade on skin elicited a certain primal fear. They had already been cut several times now. A few of them were already traumatized for life. Just seeing the saw swinging like a whip was enough to drain the blood from their faces.

But their rebellious spirits hadn’t been entirely quashed just yet. One of them even judged that she couldn’t cut them too severely. He raised his fist and charged at her in a suicide attack.

His judgment wasn’t entirely wrong. In fact, throwing his weight into a charge was probably even a correct decision against a coping saw.

The pink-haired priestess just scowled in irritation.

“Goodness, you’re annoying.”

The charging boy was met with an airy roundhouse kick, which sent him flying.

Phosphorescent light filled the dark alley. A quick, instantaneous Guiding Enhancement had powered up her kick to a strength unbelievable for someone of her small stature.

The young man crashed into a wall and slumped to the ground, where he lay groaning and unable to stand up. The girl’s eyes were completely cold as she approached him.

“This is getting to be a bother. Perhaps it would be faster if I were to saw off one of your arms?”

That wasn’t an empty threat. The girl wrapped the coping saw around the boy’s shoulder joint. He struggled to get away, but she had him pinned down

such that he couldn't move.

"D-don't...! You really think you can get away with this?!"

"Can't I? Would anyone really care if trash were to be cleaned out of a dark alley?"

There was no hesitation in her voice. The ice-cold threat sent shivers down the young men's spines.

"It would probably be a relief to the Common folk you're always bothering. Even the Order of Knights wouldn't seriously investigate the deaths of nuisances like yourselves. They'll just assume you took one of your usual fights too far and died like fools. No witnesses, no suspects. That would be the end of that, no? This is why it's important to be careful of how you portray yourself on a day-to-day basis."

"B-but you're a priestess! There's no way you'd really kill someone!"

"Who knooows? I'm a wandering priestess on a pilgrimage, and I'm only staying in this city for a few days. Even if I were found out, the Faust wouldn't care about a teeny-tiny town like Libelle. If anything, they might even praise me for taking out the trash."

There wasn't even the faintest trace of a conscience in her tone. Her ruthlessness was such a far cry from an ordinary priestess that it terrified them even more.

"Hurry up and tell me everything you know! I'm really not in the mood to hear your whiny little screams."

"S-stop...! We got nothing to do with the Fourth, really! And we don't wanna get near 'em, either! We were told not to take that creepy drug! Right, guys?! It's the truth!"

"I see..."

His tear ducts must have given way from fear; torrents of tears and snot were starting to flood his face. It definitely didn't look like an act. *He might even be telling the truth*, Momo thought, but being kind to garbage wouldn't benefit her or Menou in any way, so she decided to saw off his arm for good measure.

“Well, here goes nothing.” Momo grabbed both ends of the saw and stepped on his shoulder to hold it in place, prompting a louder scream.

“You demooon!”

“I-if our leader was here, you’d be dead!”

“...Leader?”

Just as Momo was about to start sawing, one of the delinquent’s words caught her attention. If they still thought their leader could help them even in this situation, they must have a considerable amount of faith in whoever it was.

This was perfect.

This so-called leader could probably give her better intel than these bottom-tier ruffians. Momo decided to extract this person’s location by way of her saw but was distracted before she could get back to using it.

“Over here! This weird priestess just attacked us out of nowhere!”

One of the fleeing delinquents had apparently gone to get this “leader” for help.

Even better. Momo turned toward the source of the voice. Whoever this person might be, they probably had more useful information than these idiots.

Momo smiled in a sinister way, but then the smile froze on her face.

She heard clacking footsteps, echoing loudly even outdoors.

Then someone with an overwhelmingly powerful presence appeared.

It was a woman tall enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with any man, her red-tinged blond hair trailing behind her. Her handsome features were both wild and refined. The amount of skin exposed by her angular, open-backed dress was somewhat excessive, but she stood proudly as if to show off the physical beauty of her body.

“Honestly. Whoever it is, I won’t have them wreaking havoc in—oh?”

It was none other than Ashuna Grisarika, whose eyes sparkled when they fell on Momo.

“Ooh! If it isn’t Momo!”

Without a word, Momo charged her coping saw with Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—

“If we’re meeting again in a place like this, it really must be—”

Invoke [Oscillation]

“This is where you die, Princess-poo!”

Shrieking with such intense emotion that her calmness until that moment seemed unthinkable, Momo lunged forward and swung her vibrating coping saw like a whip.

The battle between Momo and Ashuna ended quickly.

There was little to be said about it. Momo wanted a serious fight, but the battle-loving princess was overjoyed to take her on. Making her happy was the opposite of Momo’s goal, so she gave up as soon as her initial attack failed.

And of course, Ashuna didn’t seem the least bit bothered that Momo had attacked her.

“You’re always so energetic, Momo!”

“Zip it...”

Ashuna grinned merrily at Momo, whose only response was an annoyed gripe.

They were seated side by side at a seedy bar in a cellar near the alley.

The young delinquents Momo had been pressing for information had scattered. When they learned that Momo was an acquaintance of Ashuna’s, they inexplicably accepted everything without further complaints. Momo found the whole thing terribly exhausting.

“So what in the world are you doing here, Your Highness? If anything, I would’ve expected you to be at Libelle Castle.”

“‘Your Highness?’ Come now, Momo, don’t be so formal. Why don’t you keep calling me Princess-poo, my friend?”

“Why in the world didn’t you die in those ruiiins...?!”

In mere minutes of conversing, Momo's composure was already slipping as Ashuna grated on her nerves.

On the way to this city, Ashuna and Momo had run into each other in the Wild Frontier. Ashuna dragged Momo into exploring some ancient ruins they happened to find like adventurers, but Momo had used Ashuna as bait to escape and left her alone there. And yet, here she was, alive and well—and more annoying than ever, as far as Momo was concerned.

But for some reason, that just made Ashuna even happier.

"Speaking of the ruins, those gargoyles were pretty tough. Enemies based on the Concept of Original Sin are always bothersome. Demons, especially. My fighting style doesn't seem to be very well matched for them."

"Well, that's because your only strategy is brute force, Princess-poo. And gargoyles are more like knockoffs than actual demons, since they're just stone statues that have been conferred with demon energy."

The bodies of demons were composed of Original Sin themselves. Essentially, a demon was the result of extracting the essence of an Original Sin. Anything it absorbed, whether organic or inorganic, would be transformed into something of an evil nature. The Concept of Original Sin naturally eroded the fundamental composition of things and made them all the same.

"Gargoyles have physically absorbed demons and changed their own composition. It's more like a monster than a demon. After all, a monster is really just a living thing that's absorbed an Original Sin and changed in nature."

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

Original Sin Conjurings were unique in terms of their origin. Long ago, there was no such thing. About a thousand years prior, the being that brought demons and monsters into the world suddenly appeared.

The originator of all Concepts of Original Sin was Pandemonium.

A single girl with a Pure Concept and a wild imagination created demons, and the blood and flesh she shed turned into monsters. Original Sin Conjurings were

based at first on a Pure Concept controlled by one single Otherworlder. It was the lesser imitations that became known as Original Sin Conjurings.

Momo sipped on the milk she'd ordered as she thought back on this origin story.

Pandemonium was sealed away as one of the Four Major Human Errors, and thus it became the name of the site of the ruins. The Pure Concept sealed above the ocean to the south of Libelle was the source of the monsters that now ravaged this world.

"I don't get it, though. Why go to the trouble of conferring demons into something else? By making them more physical, they lose their immortality, right? Can't you just summon a demon as is, like that time in Grisarika Kingdom?"

"It's a matter of creating more mass. Calling forth a large-mass demon from the Concept of Original Sin requires a sacrifice of equal size, not to mention high-level conjuring techniques. It's more cost-effective to call on smaller, lesser demons and confer them into something, inanimate or otherwise. But more importantly, Princess Leader-poo..."



Momo wasn't here to explain the nature of demons or Original Sin. She stared hard at Ashuna.

"Even if I generously overlook why you're here in the first place, how in the world did you end up playing king to those trash-babies?"

"Hey, don't call them that. They're good kids. Once you get 'em to do your bidding, they're almost adorable."

As usual, they were operating on completely different wavelengths. Ashuna probably wasn't intentionally avoiding the question, but her strangely off-kilter answer put a sour expression on Momo's face.

"Talking to you is so stress-inducing..."

"Really? I enjoy talking to you, Momo. Besides, most of them are just youngsters from the Noblesse getting up to a little naughtiness in town. You never know, it might end up being beneficial to know them in the future."

"Dumpster diving doesn't sound very beneficial to me. Not to mention, aren't you in the height of your rebellious teen phase yourself, Princess-poo?"

"Come on, now. They're still young. It's always worth talking to the younger generation for that reason alone. After all, we're around the same age."

It wasn't entirely illogical, Momo supposed. And it seemed pointless to press her further.

Ashuna was a princess of a different nation. Making personal connections here wouldn't be of any practical use to her. On this continent, there was little interaction between nations, since they were all separated by the Wild Frontier. They weren't completely disconnected, but most nations didn't have time or energy to spare on their neighbors.

"Aren't things getting out of hand in your own nation right about now?" Momo asked. "I mean, didn't your esteemed father just have his head lopped off by the Holy Inquisition recently? I know you're the youngest child, but should you reeeally be messing around here?"

"Wouldn't *you* go to another nation if things were getting out of hand at home?"

Ashuna's father had committed the sin of summoning an Otherworlder just three weeks prior. In fact, it was he who had called Akari into this world.

As Momo looked at Ashuna searchingly, trying to sound out her goals, Ashuna gazed back.

"Political conflict just isn't my thing. I wanted to get out fast before I got dragged into it. Some of my relatives just love to make simple things needlessly complicated, you know? I don't want anything to do with the selection of our next leader, thank you very much."

"How very self-centered..."

"I prefer to think of it as being prepared. Part of the reason I became a knight in the first place was so I'd be allowed to carry a sword no matter where I go, in case I need to get away from some political nonsense." Ashuna cackled merrily.

Truly, it was fittingly irresponsible behavior for the freewheeling, justice-seeking Princess Knight. Momo couldn't hide her amazement at the uncharacteristically carefree declaration from a supposed member of the Noblesse.

"Anyway, tell me something: Why were you picking on them, Momo?"

As Ashuna changed the subject back to the matter at hand, Momo fell silent.

Her intention had been to press the local delinquents for information to find out the members and hideout of the Fourth in Libelle. Since she was in unfamiliar territory, that seemed like the fastest way to figure things out.

And yet, Ashuna had beaten her to the punch and even got the delinquents under her control.

"...I'm trying to clean out the Fourth. They're as common as cockroaches, really, but the ones in this town are definitely involved in some kind of ceremony related to Original Sin. Do you know anything about a red pill?"

"Ah, that, eh? You work fast."

"Do you know something about it?"

"Of course. I've been putting a stop to the circulation of that so-called monstine. The Fourth tried to distribute it to those little henchmen of mine,

you see. So I've been using that information to calculate their route. I've already pinned down the place where they're producing it, and I've got a solid idea of who's behind it, too. Here, take a look at this."

Momo raised her eyebrows, but Ashuna just grinned and produced something from her bosom.

"See? I got an invitation from Manon Libelle to an evening ball at Libelle Castle."

"Manon Libelle...? She's the daughter of the lord of this city, if I recall. And what about her?"

"Well, the head of the family, Trizista Libelle, has been in poor health. And so they're having a party to debut her as his successor, it seems."

Evidently, the sealed letter she was flapping around was a written invitation. How fitting for a princess, even if she was from another kingdom.

"This is just a hunch, but I think she's involved in the movements of the Fourth in Libelle. Why don't we get in there and investigate together?"

"Why do you just naturally assume I'll work with you, Princess-poo?"

"Well, why not? It's not a big deal."

"I'll pass. Thanks. It sounds like a waste of time."

Ashuna looked somewhat taken aback. "You won't come with me? Well then, why don't you infiltrate the monstine production base while I investigate Manon Libelle? It wouldn't be so bad to split the work and share our results later. In fact, why not make it a contest to see who gets the most intel, while we're at it?"

"I suppose that's fine, but are you really any good at sneaking around, Princess-poo?"

"Oh-ho? I hate to tell you this, Momo, but there's nothing I can't do. I take a fair amount of pride in my ability to sniff out an enemy's weak points."

"Sniff out? If you're depending on some weird sixth sense, that's already a bad siiign..."

Momo snorted contemptuously. No sane person would put such faith in an instinct they couldn't even properly explain. *I've never heard of a princess who lives on pure animal instincts*, she thought wryly, giving an exaggerated shrug.

Of course, that didn't seem to bother Ashuna. After all, she was a princess of the Noblesse and had accomplished so much that she was widely known as the Princess Knight. She was all too happy to accept a challenge from Momo.

"Believe what you will, Momo. You'll eat those words when you see my investigative prowess. I promise I'll bring back valuable information from this evening ball."

"Why should I care? You can do whatever you want, Princess-poo. I'll go and crush this so-called production base. I'll be awaiting news of your great success."

Momo jeered at the confident princess and left her behind.

"Sooo, turns out she's still alive."

In the hotel lounge later that night, Menou furrowed her brow at Momo's verbal report.

"Why would a princess of Grisarika Kingdom become the boss of a band of delinquents...?"

Having gotten a cheap hotel room for the night, Menou had sneaked away from Akari to meet with Momo.

Ashuna was a real princess, even if she was from a different kingdom. It made absolutely no sense that she would be ordering around young hoodlums in the back alleys of some other nation.

"I don't know why. If I had to guess, I think she does it for fuuun."

"That's a strange sense of fun for a royal princess. Honestly... And how did she track down the production base and the mastermind already? Surely she can't have gotten here much sooner than I did."

She imagined they had departed the neighboring nation on roughly the same date. Since Menou was traveling with Akari, a total novice, she had planned out the journey with caution. Ashuna had probably taken the shortest possible

route across the border through the Wild Frontier, but even then, there couldn't be more than a week's difference at most between their arrivals. For her to gather so much promising information in such a short time was nothing short of astonishing.

"I suppose they don't call her the Princess Knight for nothing. She's certainly bold to stick her nose into all these affairs, for better or worse."

"Agreed. So I suppose I'll go crush this so-called production base tomorrow night."

"About that, Momo. I'm actually planning to infiltrate the evening ball at Libelle Castle tomorrow as a guest."

As Ashuna had mentioned, Manon Libelle was hosting a ball. Since Count Libelle was bedridden, this party was intended to introduce Manon to the public as his representative.

As the head of the Faust in this city, Sicilia was invited, too. Menou had managed to get a hold of an invitation, so she planned to attend as well. With luck, she was hoping to infiltrate the castle.

"I doubt there'll be anyone strong at the production base, so I can do it alooone! But more importantly, darliiing!"

Momo was accustomed to working separately, so she insisted she wasn't too concerned about that. Instead, she grasped Menou's shoulders tightly.

"Momo?"

"Let me make your dress!"

"My dress? Why?" Menou blinked in confusion.

The priestess robes that Menou and Momo usually wore were perfectly acceptable as formal garb for the Faust. The only potential issue was that both of theirs had been slightly modified, but they could still wear them to any event with pride.

"I'll be wearing my priestess robes to the ball. Since I'm going to be part of Pastor Sicilia's entourage, that makes perfect sense."

"It doesn't!" Momo bellowed. "Listen, darliiing! You're not going to this party

to have fun. You're investigating the enemy and infiltrating their base! Why would you wear an outfit that practically screams 'I'm a priestess' in enemy territory?!"

"H-hmm. I suppose you have a point, but..."

"Besides, that damned Princess-poo will be there. She's got stupidly strong instincts, so what if she sets her sights on yooou?!"

Momo was rambling, but there was some truth to her words. The intensity of her tone made Menou shrink back a bit.

"And most of all!" Momo clenched her fist dramatically, leaving no room for protest. "You'd look so stylish, darliiing!!"

"B-but, Momo..." Menou tried to talk down her sparkly-eyed aide in a calm, rational voice. "The ball is tomorrow. You wouldn't have time or materials to make a dress before then, even if it's just a costume, would you?"

"One night is plenty," Momo declared.

She seemed determined. Admittedly, Menou wasn't experienced enough in tailoring clothes to know how long it would take to make one dress. But Momo seemed so confident that it sounded like she might really be able to do it.

"Now, there's not a moment to waaaste. If you'll excuse me!"

Seemingly full of inspiration, Momo bounded out of the room, leaving Menou alone.

She was certainly the kind of assistant who could complete any task she set her mind to. In all likelihood, she really would deliver the dress tomorrow. Still, Menou couldn't help wondering why Momo was hell-bent on the strangest of things.

"Well, Momo aside...the real problem is Akari."

There was one other problem on Menou's mind.

It was Akari, of course. If Menou was going to a ball at Libelle Castle, she was guaranteed to kick up a fuss and demand to come along.

With a heavy sigh, Menou headed back to the room where Akari was waiting.

“I wanna go, too!”

Sure enough, Akari’s reaction to Menou’s plan for the next day was exactly what she’d predicted.

“No fair! No fair! I’m the one who said I wanted to go first! How come you get to go and I don’t? Life is so unfair!”

“I told you, it’s not a matter of fairness. It’s just for my job...”

“What kind of super-fun job is that?!”

Most attendees at these types of party were there as part of their professional duty.

“And besides! What are you gonna do if I get kidnapped or something while you’re gone, Menou?!”

“I’ll say a prayer in honor of your necessary sacrifice.”

“What?!”

Akari was starting to get irrational, so Menou responded coolly.

“All joking aside, it would be far more trouble to bring you along. I’m sorry, but the invitations are only for one person—no plus-ones. Besides, you don’t have anything to wear, do you?”

“I’ve got my school uniform!”

“Ah... Well, I suppose that’s one kind of formal wear.”

The uniform Akari had been wearing when she was summoned certainly could pass. It was stowed away in her luggage, but it would be entirely too conspicuous if she wore it in public.

“But no. We don’t have any custom of students wearing those kinds of uniforms in this world. You’ll just have to stay here and behave.”

“Mrrr...” Akari stopped sulking long enough to cast a puppy dog look at Menou. “Then you’ll at least let me see you in a dress, right?”

Menou smiled sweetly. “Absolutely not.”

“Then I wanna go, toooo!”

No amount of additional persuasion was enough to stop Akari.

The evening ball at Libelle Castle was a gaudy affair typical of the Noblesse.

Menou was in the dance hall of Libelle Castle. Like many castles of the Noblesse, the interior was decorated extravagantly, with food and centerpieces set up on tables throughout the room. The attendees chatted among themselves as live music flowed through the hall. Servers patrolled around the space, constantly replacing the guests' glasses. A magnificent chandelier dangled from the ceiling above it all.

Amid the mingling guests in fine tuxedos and fashionable dresses, Menou hung back like a wallflower.

She, too, was clad in a gorgeous dress.

In the end, Momo had delivered on her promise, and so Menou was wearing the result of her efforts. Technically, it served as a disguise as well.

The outfit gave her a very different air than when she wore her priestess robes. Her hair, normally tied back in a ponytail, was arranged in a loose bun. Her trademark scarf ribbon was worn around her neck.

Menou's gaze was fixed on Manon Libelle.

Since the head of her house and the city, Trizista Libelle, was confined to his sickbed, Manon was taking over his position. The main goal of this party was to introduce her as such to the public.

As the hostess, she was constantly fluttering around from group to group, chatting with the Noblesse and the wealthiest Commons.

Conversely, there wasn't a single member of the Faust to be seen.

Sicilia, the pastor, had only exchanged a brief greeting with her. It was virtually unheard-of for any of the Faust to make a proactive appearance at these types of functions. The Faust had so little political involvement with the other estates of the realm that they were often seen as arrogant, indifferent, or overly fastidious.

And yet, it was the Faust who made all final judgments between right and wrong.

In a way, it was understandable that the Noblesse would be dissatisfied with this. In fact, it was almost set up that way deliberately. The displeasure of the Commons was directed toward the Noblesse, who in turn directed their displeasure toward the Faust. That was the nature of the three-estate system.

And the displeasure of the Faust? Just as she was thinking about this, a beaming smile filled her vision.

“Menou! Having fun?”

It was Akari.

Before Menou’s eyes was a sight that was both familiar and entirely strange. Like Menou, Akari was wearing a different outfit than usual, but it was one Menou saw every day.

Akari was wearing priestess robes.

Her robes were simple, not altered like Menou’s or Momo’s. Noticing Menou’s gaze, Akari spread out her arms to show off.

“Hee-hee, what do you think? I’m a pure, proper, and powerful priestess!”

“Idiots aren’t supposed to wear those robes...”

“Did you just say something really mean?”

Menou covered her face with one hand and groaned while Akari peered at her and pouted.

In the end, she couldn’t stop Akari from coming along.

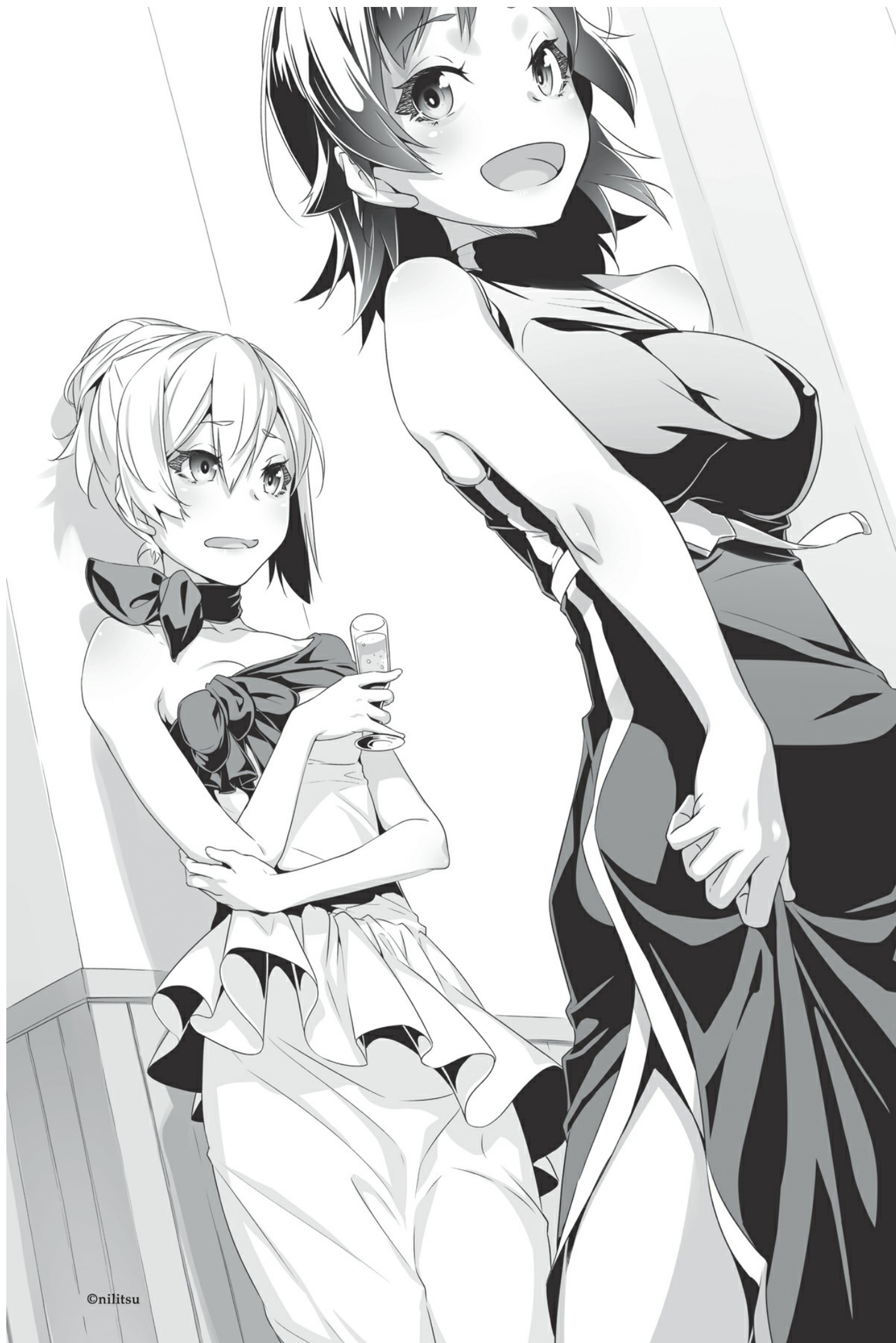
She couldn’t wear her school uniform, but they didn’t have a dress for Akari. When Menou asked Momo to modify the dress she made for her to match Akari’s measurements, Momo flew into a rage and said she’d rather burn the dress than comply with such a request, so Akari ended up pretending to be part of Pastor Sicilia’s entourage to come along.

Sicilia had provided spare priestess robes for her from the church, but the result didn’t sit well, even for an Executioner like Menou.

“Honestly...this is such an insult to proper priestesses and nuns who go through rigorous training and exams.”

“Come on, is it really that bad?”

Obviously. Menou did have pride as a member of the Faust, after all. Even if it was for a mission, it still felt shameful to allow her to wear those robes.



“Just remember not to follow any strangers, even if they speak to you, all right? And don’t touch any of the food or drinks here, no matter what. I know we went over this, but the host of this party has been distributing a strange drug.”

“I know. You already told me. What do you think of me, anyway?”

“An idiot who’s mentally ten, as I believe I’ve said before.”

Akari puffed up her cheeks. “That’s not true. Someone just said to me earlier that I’m a lovely lady. So I’m obviously a proper grown-up!”

“It’s things like that that *really* make me worry about you...”

Akari seemed like she would fall for smooth talk far too easily.

Still, as long as they were here, at least Sicilia would probably keep an eye on her if Menou had to step away.

This evening ball was a perfect opportunity. The castle staff were busy keeping the party running, and Manon Libelle herself would undoubtedly be pinned down in the room all evening. The security of Libelle Castle would be shorthanded.

Menou just had one concern about infiltrating the inner castle.

She looked around the hall, but she didn’t see the person in question anywhere.

“Menou? What’s wrong?”

“...I need to step away for a minute. Remember, don’t let anyone talk you into going with them.”

“Aww...”

Ignoring Akari’s whining, Menou went into action.

The party was starting to reach its peak. Deciding this was the best time to make her move, she stepped away from the wall. She had gathered a rough idea of where the guards were located. Menou started to walk with casual steps.

Shedding her role as a wallflower, she slipped through the crowds of people.

Placing her untouched glass on the table, she took care to consider how others saw her, consciously behaving as naturally as possible so she wouldn't stand out in anyone's mind or memories.

Not a single partygoer made any note of Menou.

Successfully avoiding the attention of others, Menou made it across the hall without being spoken to or noticed by anyone.

When she stepped out onto the terrace, the cold night air caressed her skin. Looking up at the sky, she took a deep breath. The weather seemed to be cloudy, as the moon and stars were invisible in the night sky.

"No protection from Saint Marta, then..."

As she headed toward the residential area, Menou nonchalantly murmured a line from a fairy tale about a saint who controlled miracles of the moon, whose likeness was carved into the five-*in* coin.

Most likely, the guards inside the estate wouldn't be a problem. When she was investigating, there was only one point that concerned her.

If she happened to run into that problem, how would she deal with it?

Menou contemplated this as she kept walking. The only way forward from the terrace was to go toward the mansion along a path lined by tall shrubs. She was following this path toward the inner sanctum of the castle, separated from the garden by carefully arranged shrubbery, when she suddenly heard a voice.

"I must say, you excel at concealing your presence."

Someone was addressing her from the garden on the other side of the bushes.

Menou narrowed her eyes and froze. She had sensed there was someone beyond the shrubs, but she certainly hadn't expected them to talk to her.

It was followed by the sound of the bushes being pushed apart. The person on the other side was trying to shove their way through the wall of shrubbery.

As Menou stood stunned at the sheer forcefulness, the person burst out of the bushes behind her. Menou started to turn around, then decided to keep facing forward.

The person who had just appeared was unlikely to attack her from behind.

“You blend in with your surroundings very well. Instead of avoiding people’s eyes, you ensure that they won’t notice you even if they see you, eh? Your invisibility was so natural that even I might have overlooked you.”

Menou silently cursed at the familiar voice. She had heard from Momo that this person was invited. She kept an eye out for her in the ball and even suspected that this might happen.

And sure enough, she was already infiltrating the inner area, too. Was she bold to attempt it without even knowing the layout, or just reckless? Menou hesitated for a moment before settling on the opinion that she was exactly like the rumors said.

“A friend of mine said that I didn’t seem like I’d be good at sneaking around, so I wanted to prove her wrong. I investigated a little, but I wasn’t expecting to find someone else up to the same thing. Seems Manon Libelle has a lot of enemies, too.”

This woman made no attempt to hide her nature, no matter whom she was addressing. Her tone was imperious, and there wasn’t a trace of hesitance in her overpowering presence. Even without turning around, Menou could clearly tell she was grinning broadly as she spoke.

All of this was probably why she didn’t seem well suited to sneaking around, but no doubt none of that mattered to Ashuna.

As far as she was concerned, she had no need to hide anything about herself.

“I’m Ashuna Grisarika, a knight and princess of the neighboring Grisarika Kingdom.”

It was none other than the Princess Knight who proudly introduced herself to Menou. She was full of so much life that many would admire her.

“And who might you be?”

Her tone was confident. Put on the spot, Menou grimaced.

In her current outfit, she should be able to deal with this easily enough. She was wearing a dress, so she could just pretend to be a young woman from the

Noblesse or something. At the very least, there was nothing to give away the fact that she was really a priestess. She could just say she was going into the garden to get some air.

But considering future possibilities, she didn't want Ashuna to see her face.

Could she get away with it? Menou attempted to respond without turning around.

"As it happens, one of the maids is sneaking away from work for a secret rendezvous. I thought I would track her down and tell her off."

"That's a poor excuse." Ashuna saw through her lie instantly. "One of the Noblesse wouldn't be taught how to hide her presence like that. They're not expected to fight, after all."

"...By that logic, since you were able to detect my presence, wouldn't that mean you aren't of the Noblesse, either?"

"The Order of Knights are an exception. Knights seek the battlefield for the sake of peace. We are expected not to be sweet, but strong. Would you claim that you are a knight?"

Ashuna's reasoning was self-centered, yet logical. Menou shrugged.

So there was no talking her way out of this one. Not an ideal situation. Or perhaps... Menou suddenly struck upon a possible reason that things had unfolded this way.

Perhaps Manon Libelle had invited Ashuna and let them both slip away so that they would butt heads.

"How infuriating..."

"Did you say something?"

"...No."

If she had walked right into a trap, then that was entirely her own blunder.

I suppose I have no choice, then, Menou thought as she turned around.

When the other person finally turned around, Ashuna raised her eyebrows.

Even now that they were eye to eye, Ashuna couldn't see her face.

At first, it seemed like a trick of the light, or perhaps she was wearing a thin veil, but no. Her face was obstructed by something like a dark mist. It was obviously a deliberate phenomenon.

Hiding your face was the most effective way to prevent others from getting any personal information about you. Most intriguing of all, Ashuna couldn't even perceive how she was producing the fog to do this.

It must be some unusual Guiding vessel, or a continuous crest she had activated beforehand, or maybe even some entirely new technique that Ashuna had never heard of.

At any rate, it was clear this person really didn't want her face to be seen. It seemed like her voice had been altered, too. She was in a lovely dress, but it was clear that she wasn't just an ordinary young noblewoman.

"No more lying, eh? I appreciate you dropping the weak excuses, but are you really so shy that you can't show me your face?"

"I lead a humble life, so I know my place, that's all. If my honesty pleases you, then would you mind letting me move on?"

"Sorry, but I always feel the itch to fight suspicious characters."

"...Pardon me for saying so, but I'm amazed you managed to get knighted with that attitude."

The Order of Knights were permitted to carry a sword in town. Since the role came with a weapon-carrying permit, the training required to join was intense enough to be on par with that of the priestesses. Ashuna understood why the mystery woman might be bemused, but the princess simply laughed.

"Pah, a little recklessness is permitted if it's for the sake of protecting the peace, that's all. Now, as far as I'm concerned, I'll be happy to keep my sword sheathed if you show me your face and explain yourself. In fact, I'd even be willing to consider helping you, depending on your objective."

"I think you know as well as I do that I'm not going to do that. In other words, Your Highness, do you wish to fight me?"

"Glad you're so quick on the uptake." Ashuna smirked and drew her sword.

“You see, I can tell just by looking how strong someone is. Did you know that strong people are beautiful? That’s why I’m willing to stake my life on my quest to find strength.”

“Is that right...?”

As the young woman responded, she flipped her dress’s hem upward and reached toward her thigh. With one flutter of her skirt, she had drawn a dagger and taken a battle-ready stance.

“Oh-ho...” Ashuna looked at the quietly drawn blade and whistled, impressed.

Her foe’s body seemed relaxed, and she held the dagger with easy familiarity. Her stance seemed natural, when in actuality, there were no gaps in her defenses. Ashuna could tell at a glance that her proficiency was praiseworthy.

The lingering echo of their conversation left the air between them slightly relaxed. Then both of their bodies lit up with the glow of Guiding Light.

Guiding Enhancement was a technique that drew power from the soul and used it to improve the user’s overall physical strength. Once both were thus strengthened, Ashuna was the first to strike.

It wasn’t such a reckless charge that she was trying to win in one strike, but assertiveness was in Ashuna Grisarika’s very nature.

“Hyah!” Ashuna slashed down with a sharp breath, but her opponent didn’t try to block the attack with her dagger.

Instead, she kept her dagger raised as she slid to the side, avoiding Ashuna’s swing. A half-step moved her out of the broadsword’s path, and she swung her arm as the blade flew past her.

Before Ashuna could change the direction of her slash, her opponent’s dagger struck the broadsword.

She couldn’t move her blade immediately. In the next moment, the other fighter darted close to her, putting her in range of the dagger. Ashuna’s broadsword would be no use at such short range. Her opponent’s blade flashed.

Ashuna gnashed her teeth. With a ferocious grin, she used the knuckle guard of her sword’s hilt to knock away the dagger coming toward her. Punching

forward with the hilt, she moved to strike her opponent with its pommel, or so it seemed.

It was a feint.

Still leaning forward, Ashuna shot her leg out toward her opponent's head. Her kick was so sharp that if it collided with her temple, it would likely crush her face. If she insisted on staying in dagger range, it would be difficult to dodge.

But instead, her opponent relinquished her close range easily and jumped back. Both of them assumed fighting postures again, as if shifting back to square one.

"...Hmph." Ashuna let out a disgruntled sigh.

After exchanging a few short blows, several things were clear to her. This was a strong opponent. She had remarkable talent. But it was also obvious that her heart wasn't in this fight. Her subdued reactions showed that she didn't want an all-out battle.

"So your heart's not in it, eh? Well, I suppose I'm the one who came after you first."

"Indeed."

There was no enthusiasm in her response, either. Evidently, she wasn't going to rise to Ashuna's challenge. In that respect, Momo was easy to understand and charming in her own way, but... Ashuna pursed her lips.

Then I'll just draw out her desperation. Ashuna boosted her Guiding Enhancement a level.

The light around her body grew brighter, chasing the darkness out of her immediate area.

Essentially, she wanted her opponent to feel that she had no choice but to fight properly, or she wouldn't even be able to flee. Taking a deep breath, Ashuna readied her broadsword.

Her opponent's stance hadn't changed at all.

Impressive confidence. The corners of Ashuna's lips quirked upward.

From a ready stance to an instant attack—she jumped forward fast enough to set fire to the air. With her next stride, she was within range of her opponent, and she unleashed a lightning-fast thrust.

Seeming taken aback by the sudden burst of speed, her opponent parried directly with her dagger. Foolish. Her attacks weren't so light that they could be blocked with only a dagger; she would cut right through. Making a snap decision, Ashuna doubled down on the strength of her thrust.

The crest in her opponent's dagger glinted.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

Wind burst out of the dagger.

The conjuring had been constructed and invoked in the blink of an eye, pressing Ashuna back. It gave the dagger wielder the extra strength she needed to block the princess's broadsword.

Her attack thwarted, Ashuna murmured in awe despite herself. "Magnificent."

It was a maneuver worthy of honest praise.

Her control over her Guiding Force was flawless. Her judgment of the strength she needed to repel Ashuna's thrust, impeccable. Her courage in parrying an attack that easily could have killed her if she made a single mistake, remarkable. And most of all, her construction of the crest conjuring was exponentially faster than Ashuna's would have been. She didn't consider herself bad at invoking crests by any means, but clearly the person before her eyes was on another level.

She could only have accomplished this with diligent training and an ironclad will.

When two people using Guiding Enhancement crossed swords, the size of their chosen blades dictated how much Guiding Force they could use to charge their weapons. The materials might affect how well its power flowed, but generally, the bigger the weapon, the more it could hold.

This meant a difference in weight and in strength.

But the person Ashuna was facing now was making up for the difference in their Guiding Force with sheer skill.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—

Experimentally, while still keeping her opponent locked in place with their clashing blades, Ashuna charged her sword with Guiding Force at point-blank range.

The royal sword's crest began to invoke a phenomenon, sending out waves of heat. It would be a matter of seconds before it unleashed the conjuring.

Then the dagger in her opponent's hand flashed again.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

Before the flames Ashuna created could contract and explode, a blast of wind left the dagger.

Invoke [Flameburst]

The explosion was invoked a beat later, but most of the flames had already been blown away. It had all the force of a dampened firecracker. It would normally direct itself toward the target, but the gale that had interrupted the invocation had scattered most of its fuel and greatly reduced the force behind it.

The fading flames lightly scorched Ashuna's cheek as they dispersed.

"...Oof!"

The crest she had started invoking first had been thoroughly outpaced. Her opponent had seen Ashuna invoking her crest, deduced what conjuring she was attempting, and constructed one of her own with incredible speed and control.

Whoever she was, her skills were absolutely beautiful.

It was rare to see this level of talent in all but the most elite knights across the continent, or even among the Faust. She had the ability to react to all kinds of situations, instead of simply trying to kill. This was not someone who had been trained to be used and thrown away. She was meant to fulfill her missions, survive battles, and live to see another day.

A shiver of pleasure ran up Ashuna's spine.

"Well done."

Her cheeks were so flushed that the heat of the scattering sparks had little effect. Her heart was pounding, and there was an itch in her chest that spread into an excited tremble throughout her body. It was as if some strange electrical current were coursing through her. The Guiding Light around Ashuna's body grew stronger with her soaring spirit.

She grinned fiercely.

"Seems I'm no match for you in controlling Guiding Light—but I've got the upper hand in close combat!"

Her broadsword let out a roar.

There was a powerful flash that seemed to envelop the air around them. Her opponent dodged to the side in a smooth evasive maneuver. That was the right move: Ashuna's single swing was too strong to parry even with Guiding Enhancement. She set in with a volley of attacks too swift to counter without being crushed.

But there was no way her opponent could keep dodging without parrying or fighting back for long.

Her volume of Guiding Light was middling at best—nowhere near Ashuna's amount. Hence her decision to overcome her with sheer power. Instead of a battle of skill, Ashuna was forcing her into a contest of strength with her aggressive attacks.

Finally, her opponent was pushed onto the defensive. She managed to parry one attack. But the recoil must have made her hand go numb, forcing her to drop her dagger.

Ashuna had won.

Or so she thought.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Double Invoke [Guiding Thread, Gale]

Before Ashuna could swing her sword again, her opponent used a crest

conjuring.

The falling dagger jerked back up into the air and sailed toward Ashuna's throat.

Her eyes widened. She bent backward, just barely managing to dodge it. But the dagger didn't stop. The direction of the gale changed, and this time, it sped straight down toward her.

A remote conjuring, without direct contact. Ashuna narrowed her eyes, trying to see how she was controlling the dagger, and noticed a glittering strand of Guiding Light extending from the hilt. The other end was in her opponent's hand.

She was using a crest conjuring by way of the Guiding Light thread to control the direction of the *Gale*, manipulating her dagger in midair.

The carefully controlled wind sent the dagger flying toward Ashuna's blade with snakelike movements. But that was foolish. Without the element of surprise, it would be a simple matter to deflect it. An attack driven only by the wind would be easy to smack down.

Ashuna bared her teeth with a determined smirk and prepared to counter the attack.

Guiding Light: Connect—

Then she sensed her opponent constructing a conjuring.

Impossible! Her eyes widened. Could this person really invoke another conjuring while still remotely controlling the dagger?

If so, then she must be intending that as the killing blow.

Ashuna twisted to the side hastily. The dagger grazed her flank, leaving a gash. She ignored it. What she really needed to defend against was her opponent's next conjuring, which must be powerful if it was her main intention. Preparing to slice the attack in two, Ashuna gathered all her strength, gripped the hilt of her broadsword—and stared in shock.

Her opponent was sticking out her tongue in what looked like a mocking expression.

At the tip of her tongue was a coin, with power coursing through it.

Five-in Coin, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Bubble]

A single bubble floated into the air.

It was perfectly harmless, a trick to entertain a child. Like the Guiding Light bubbles in the legend of Saint Marta, it bobbed lightly on the wind and into Ashuna's cheek.

Pop! The bubble of light exploded with less impact than the breeze.

Both of her opponent's hands were empty. The only reason she'd put the coin on her tongue was to mock Ashuna. She spat the coin onto the ground. "*Ptooeey.*" At the same time, the dagger finally fell, its blade piercing the turf.

A beat too late, blood oozed out of Ashuna's side. Her shoulders shook.

"Pff...heh-heh."

She had used the Guiding Force thread to keep the wind crest activated and control the movements of the dagger, keeping Ashuna on her toes. At the same time, she used a perfectly harmless *five-in* coin to distract Ashuna and create an opportunity to attack.

It was an incredible move.

Maybe even superhuman. It had been so long since someone had held back against Ashuna, led her around by the nose, and even made her think she was outmatched. She had the irresistible urge to laugh. Something inside her had snapped.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Her eyes blazed as she held up her sword. "You've got some nerve! I'm impressed!!"

She raised the blade above her head, its tip pointing toward the sky. This left her exposed to a frontal attack but made it dangerous to get too close.

The other fighter used the thread to pull her dagger back into her hand. She pointed the sharp, shining blade toward Ashuna.

"I'll pay you back for that. In spades, even if I have to force you to accept it!"

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Double Invoke [Slash:

Expansion, Flameburst]

A wave of heat pushed aside the night air.

The garden was lit by a blazing blade of fire. The slashing attack, enlarged and set aflame by Ashuna's Guiding Force, stretched out far. It wasn't as enormously charged as the one that had cut right through a certain castle not long ago, but its power was still far from ordinary. She had made sure that her opponent couldn't block it, at least with any of the techniques she'd shown thus far.

This opponent outmatched her in ability, and even in strategy and reflexes.

The only method left to her to crush such an enemy was exceedingly simple: head-on, with sheer strength.

It was nothing more than brute force. She recognized that she couldn't compete in terms of technique. That was fine. The one place where she clearly outmatched her opponent was in the amount of Guiding Force energy she naturally had at her disposal. The surest way to win a battle was by leveraging one's advantages.

Overcoming the enemy with raw power. That was Ashuna's royal approach.

In this case, her opponent seemed unruffled.

Ashuna didn't hesitate, either. She simply swung her sword as her raging heart told her. But then—

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Thread)—

She was caught off guard.

Nigh-instantaneous conjuring construction. The only thing Ashuna managed to move in time was her eyes.

How was she constructing this conjuring? Her hands, which had been gripping the dagger just a moment ago, were now empty. No—on closer inspection, she was grasping a thin thread made of Guiding Force that extended toward the ground.

Dagger, Crest—

The dagger was still stabbed into the ground, coated with Ashuna's blood.

How?

Spotting the dagger unexpectedly back in its place, Ashuna hesitated for just a moment of confusion as she was starting to swing down the flame blade.

Remote Invoke [Gale]

The ground exploded.

The crest conjuring had produced a burst of air from the blade that was still stuck in the ground. The sudden air pressure in the shallow layer of earth sent dirt and dust flying everywhere, blocking Ashuna's vision.

She had completely missed her chance to bring down her sword. Beaten to the punch, Ashuna stilled for a moment. Since she couldn't see her opponent in the cloud of dirt, she couldn't lower her weapon and let her guard down.

By the time her vision cleared, there was no one there. Her opponent with the hidden face had fled in an instant.

The threat she'd been fighting was gone, but Ashuna still stood there, dazed.

She knew what had produced the cloud of dust. The dagger's crest conjuring had produced wind. Released underground, the wind pressure broke the surface of the earth and sent the dirt flying. That much she understood.

But how had she...?

Ashuna had definitely seen her opponent holding the dagger in her hand.

Hadn't she pulled it back into her grasp with the thread? Then how did it end up still stuck in the ground? How had Ashuna missed it? Did her eyes deceive her about the dagger's whereabouts? No, Ashuna would never make such a basic mistake in battle. Was she hiding a second dagger, then? But that wouldn't explain the moment she brought it back into her hands.

Ashuna's list of doubts was only growing.

She couldn't figure out how she'd missed that last trick.

Ashuna released the crest conjuring that was still in progress and put her sword back in its sheath.

Night returned to the garden.

She stooped down and picked up the fallen five-*in* coin. No matter how carefully she inspected it, though, it was just an ordinary coin. It didn't hold any hints as to her mystery opponent's identity.

Ashuna put more strength into her fingers.

The face of Saint Marta carved on the five-*in* coin was neatly folded in half.

A savage smile was playing across Ashuna's lips.

"...Ha-ha. It's been quite a while since someone's messed with me like this."

There couldn't be many people in the world with that much skill. Which was why Ashuna had one small hunch about who that person might be.

It was common for priestesses to favor one-handed weapons.

Since they generally held a scripture in their left hand, they tended to lean toward weapons they could use with just their right. And with this level of skill, it would make all the more sense if she were in a position that meant a lot of battle experience.

Was she an elite of the Faust in Libelle, then? Ashuna's gut told her otherwise. If there was someone here in a public position with that much power, there was no way Ashuna wouldn't know about her.

Then she must be someone who worked behind the scenes.

Immediately, something Momo had shouted during the incident in Garm two weeks earlier came to mind.

"Everyone but my darling should just die!!"

She didn't have any proof. It was just a hunch. But considering that Momo wore white priestess robes, it made sense.

In most cases, priestesses in white robes were aides to fully-fledged priestesses.

"So that was Momo's 'darling.'"

When they met the next day, she would have the perfect topic to lead her into and then tease her about.

As Ashuna cast aside the crumpled coin, there was a satisfied smirk on her face.

There was some kind of pillar of fire in the garden.

“Whoa, what is that?”

Drifting restlessly in the party hall, Akari’s jaw dropped as she saw it. The flames were so bright, they seemed to transform the night into broad daylight. The pillar of fire died down before long, but the resulting commotion continued.

Akari was just realizing that it might have something to do with wherever Menou had gone off to when there was a faint flash of Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Release [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

Just like that, Akari’s consciousness shifted gears.

Her happy-go-lucky expression suddenly turned grim.

“...This isn’t right.”

Taking off her headband, Akari sorted through her own memories and murmured to herself.

The headband in her hand with the flowerlike decoration was a gift she’d received before. It hadn’t happened often by any means, but this wasn’t the first time Menou had bought it for her in Garm.

But the situation unfolding in this town was more than just unusual.

“This can’t be right. I’ve never...”

“Good evening.”

Akari looked up at the unexpected greeting.

She was taken aback to find that the girl speaking to her was wearing a kimono. Even this version of Akari had never seen this particular girl before.

“Are you concerned about that little spectacle? Not to worry. It was just a bit of a gamble—it’d be lovely if it works out, but no harm done if not. Both of them are rational people, so there won’t be any serious injuries.”

What in the world was she talking about?

A ripple of agitation was running through the hall at the clearly unusual occurrence. But the girl didn't seem concerned in the least as she introduced herself inquisitively to Akari.

"My name is Manon Libelle. I don't believe we've ever been formally introduced, have we?"

It was a normal enough greeting. If this were the Akari from not long ago, she surely would have smiled back without suspicion.

But this Akari could tell that there was a hidden meaning to the girl's words. Written between the lines was the implication that they may have met before in some other way.

That must have something to do with the oddness of the current situation.

"You're..."

"Oh dear, don't worry about me. I'm really nothing more than a proxy, after all."

Akari had heard a little bit about her before. She was the proxy for the actual head of the family, Count Libelle... Was that what she meant? Somehow, it seemed like she was implying something else.

"I confess I was hoping I might get to meet you, however briefly."

"I'm sorry?" Akari didn't understand.

This was unmistakably the first time she and Manon had ever been face-to-face.

Manon reached out and lightly touched Akari's hair. "My mother had black hair just like yours."

She smiled, soft and nostalgic. Her own hair was a dark-indigo shade that was close to black. In this world, the power in someone's soul could affect the color of their hair. Genetics weren't the only determining factor.

"I don't suppose you would tell me about it. The place you were from before you came here."

“...I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

This was no white lie.

Right before they entered this town, Akari had jokingly said to Menou:

“I no longer have any recollection of my past sixteen years.”

Joke though it was, it was also rooted in the truth.

The Akari who was normally with Menou wasn’t entirely aware of it, but she really had lost almost all her memories of her life in Japan already.

Akari had used the Pure Concept of *Time* enough to erase sixteen years of memories.

“Is that so...? I see. So you’ve used your power too much already, too.” Manon understood exactly what Akari’s words meant. “I envy you. You have exactly what I’ve always wanted, you see. You have the power to change the world exactly as you see fit, as many times as it takes.”

Manon withdrew her hand and bowed her head politely.

“Forgive my intrusion. If you are able to leave this city...well, I hope you’ll live your life freely.”

With those mysterious words, Manon walked away. Akari felt even more confused as she watched her go. This situation just kept getting stranger.

Since Akari knew the future, she usually sealed that knowledge away and left things in the hands of her more oblivious self.

There were several different conditions that could invoke the conjuring that triggered this side of her consciousness.

When she was out of Menou’s sight. When Menou was in danger. And when something happened that Akari had never seen before. There were a few others as well, but these three conditions were the most important.

“I knew it. This is all wrong.”

The first day in Libelle seemed to have gone perfectly.

But ever since she’d entered Pandemonium on the second day and revived with *Regression*, something had been off.

All the incidents occurring in this city right now were completely unfamiliar even to this Akari.

“.....”

She had to know what was going on. If things changed too drastically this time, she would lose her advantage of knowing the future.

Akari had to travel with Menou without suspecting a thing and ultimately be killed by her.

Letting Menou kill her was the only method Akari could think of to save Menou from the hands of that red-haired priestess.

With a determined expression, Akari turned on her heel and headed to an area where no one else could see her.

And then, once she confirmed no one was watching, Guiding Light gleamed from her index finger.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Teleportation]

Without waiting for Menou to return, Akari disappeared in a flash of Guiding Light, leaving only a faint glow behind.

“That woman certainly knows how to be a nuisance...”

Having fled back to a room of the mansion, Menou grumbled to herself.

The dress Momo had so generously made for her was now caked in mud. *I should've been more careful*, she thought reproachfully. That was the extent of her worries about the fight.

That last move had been a ruse using Guiding Camouflage.

She used it by way of the Guiding Thread that was connected to the dagger still stabbed into the ground. While moving her hand as if to pull the dagger back, she instead used the thread to create a Guiding Camouflage illusion of the dagger returning to her hand.

As a result, Ashuna was convinced the dagger that was still in the ground was actually back in Menou's hand.

Once Ashuna was no longer focused on the dagger, Menou used the Guiding Thread that was still attached to it to activate the *Gale* crest. This produced a cloud of dirt, allowing Menou to escape into the building while Ashuna was blinded and confused.

“I don’t have time to go along with her absurd desire to fight.”

Brushing the dirt off herself, she continued complaining. Unlike Momo, Menou wasn’t blessed with a large quantity of Guiding Force. She didn’t necessarily think she would have lost if she kept fighting Ashuna head-on, but Menou didn’t stand to gain anything by winning that fight, either. So she cut it off as quickly as she could and fled.

She sighed with relief that she’d managed to get away.

Menou hadn’t used her scripture, and she was wearing a dress; her hairstyle was different, and she’d hidden her face and changed her voice. Once she changed into her priestess robes, she should be safe from detection as long as Ashuna didn’t see her dagger or anything. Even if they ran into each other somewhere else down the line, Ashuna should have no reason to suspect that it was Menou who she’d fought before.

Still, knowing what she did about Ashuna, Menou couldn’t be too careful. In the worst case, she might have even managed to figure out that she was a priestess based on her fighting style alone.

“It might be too risky to search around inside now...”

Ashuna could very well still be wandering around the area.

In truth, there wasn’t really any harm even if Ashuna identified her. It would just mean she knew there was a wandering priestess around who was skilled in battle. Whatever she might suspect, she would have no proof that Menou was an Executioner.

The only problem was that getting tangled up with Ashuna seemed like asking for all kinds of trouble.

This was especially clear after their brief battle. She was an even more unmanageable princess than the rumors said. From the bottom of her heart, Menou truly did not want anything to do with Ashuna unless absolutely

necessary.

Most of all, it was exhausting that she'd gotten into such a flashy fight with nothing in particular to show for the evening.

She cleaned off the dress enough that it wouldn't stand out as she contemplated what to do next. Thanks to Ashuna using that ridiculously showy flame sword, people were starting to gather outside the mansion. Her best bet was to use this as a chance to regroup with Akari and leave the party.

"I suppose that's it for today's operation."

She hadn't managed to get any information, but there was nothing she could do about that now. It would be too reckless to try to continue the investigation.

"Well, I'm sure Momo is doing better on her end, at least."

Momo should be able to crush some silly base belonging to the Fourth without a problem.

Placing her faith in her talented aide, Menou left the room.

It was a far too optimistic assumption.

The wind blew from the land toward the sea in the port town at night.

Momo ran against the wind through the dark.

Her breathing was ragged as she leaped from roof to roof, avoiding being seen. She was grimacing and holding her side.

Fresh blood trickled through her fingers. But it wasn't the stinging wound that was the problem.

".....Ngh!"

Momo's face was twisted in pain because of the poison that had entered her bloodstream by way of the fresh wound.

"This is awful..."

It was the worst blunder she could've made. Her head spun with shame and frustration.

But Momo still had to relay that information.

Slipping into a back alley, Momo checked her surroundings and stopped. There didn't seem to be anyone nearby.

She opened her scripture, filled it with power, and constructed a conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord's will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

Beneath the surface of the gaudy evening ball, something dark was taking place in the night.

Momo used the scripture's communication conjuring to spin the tale of what had happened to her.



Maiden Dried from Dew



Rewind time to when the evening ball at Libelle Castle had just begun.

The monstine production plant used by the Fourth was in a manor that stood in a supposedly deserted part of the port city. Since Flarette had arrived in town, they were on heightened alert, tension crackling in the air. The man who was guarding the gate could feel the nervousness from those within the building.

A lone figure approached the manor.

At a glance, she appeared to be an adorable young girl. She wore white gloves and a frilly culotte skirt. The black tights on her slender, fawn-like legs had a heart design over the thigh. It almost looked like the tail of a little devil. With her pink hair put up in two scrunchies, the diminutive girl had an impish air of cuteness.

Her sweet looks were certainly no cause for alarm. At most, one might think it would be dangerous for a young girl to be walking around alone at night.

The problem was the rest of her attire.

She wore priestess robes, albeit in white.

The sleeves and skirt hem had been altered, but it was still unmistakably a priestess's robes. The white color indicated that she was only an aide, but she was still a member of the Faust, an enemy of the Fourth.

"Hey!" the brawny guard called out, but the girl didn't slow her pace. He was taken aback by the closing distance between them. She was moving so confidently that he thought perhaps she hadn't heard him, which made him hesitate to take further action.

But that was only for an instant. He stared the girl down with a mostly menacing face.

“Stop right there. What business does a priestess—”

—*have here?* He never managed to finish his sentence.

The girl nonchalantly drew a stringlike object out from her skirt and wrapped it around the guard’s neck.

She did it so naturally that he didn’t have time to react.

The sharp string dug into his neck. The prickling sensation on his skin rendered the guard speechless.

In silence, the girl brought her face closer.

When they were close enough that their noses were practically touching, she spoke with an expression so serious, it made the grown man shudder.

“Keep quiet if you don’t want me to saw your head off.”

Her voice was so chilly that her breath felt icy cold on his face. The guard turned pale. He could imagine all too clearly what would happen if the coping saw wrapped around his neck were to move.

The girl rolled her eyes as the man went mute with fear. Then she knocked him out with a knee to the stomach.

The glow of Guiding Enhancement surrounded her body. She placed her hands on the enormous gate, although it was firmly shut.

Her delicate arms moved to the side.

The iron gate bent like it was made of putty. Even with the help of Guiding Enhancement, this strength was far from ordinary. She twisted the gate open with ease, creating a hole large enough for a person to slip through.

After walking through the front gate, the girl stood at the main entrance to the building. When she noticed it was locked, annoyance crept onto her face. She’d technically been trying to be stealthy thus far, but now she raised her foot and slammed the sole of her boot into the heavy wooden door.

It was blasted inside.

A crash far too violent to be mistaken for a visitor’s knock echoed through the building. The workers inside noticed and began clamoring immediately. There

was no indication of panic on the girl's face. She walked into the manor and headed down a hallway with her coping saw in one hand.

As she infiltrated the enemy base, there was only one thought on her mind.

I'll do my best so I can spend more time with my darling.

Momo was launching a head-on attack on the monstine production plant.

The people inside acted purely on instinct.

Clearly, they had never thought about the possibility of being attacked. There didn't even seem to be a proper chain of command. Momo fended off their uncoordinated counterattacks.

The majority of them seemed to be using this so-called monstine, presumably unaware of its side effects, but they were hardly a threat. The strengthening they got from that strange drug was no more powerful than the average person using Guiding Enhancement.

It was undoubtedly convenient to gain strength comparable to Guiding Enhancement without any training. It enhanced their resilience, too. Being able to take a punch was certainly a significant advantage in battle.

But that was all.

Since they weren't trained, they were essentially novice fighters. Slightly stronger than average amateurs were no threat to Momo, no matter how many attacked at once. She drove them off with ease.

Some scrambled away, but she didn't bother chasing them. The area was already surrounded by knights on Sicilia's command. If the fleeing members of the Fourth saw the knights and tried to resist, they'd be arrested, and if they asked for help, the knights would be able to break into their territory on the pretense of keeping the peace.

Momo stopped abruptly. She sensed an ambush waiting at the end of the hallway. The muzzle of a gun poked out around the corner.

It was a Guiding gun. These dangerous weapons automatically drew out the user's power, turning it into bullets with the pull of the trigger. The production, distribution, and ownership of Guiding guns were all forbidden, but the

Mechanical Society that controlled the eastern part of the Wild Frontier produced these pesky Guiding vessels, nonetheless.

Momo furrowed her brow and charged her priestess robes with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

At the same time as a barrier appeared directly in front of Momo, the gun opened fire.

“Just like in Grisarika Kingdom... Where are they getting these things?”

The hail of bullets ricocheted off the barrier. Before long, the firing ceased. Since the Guiding guns used power, they drained the user’s energy rather quickly.

This was her chance. Momo took a step forward. Just then, the wall next to her broke open.

As soon as the gun stopped firing, a fighter from the Fourth burst through the wall to attack. The ambush from the gun up ahead was just a feint. When the firing stopped and created an opening, they would surprise her with an attack through the wall at the side. *It isn’t a terrible plan*, Momo thought. If anything, the only miscalculation was that they were no match for her.

Momo had already sensed the enemy’s presence, so she was able to react instantly. As soon as the fighter came crashing through the wall, she grabbed his face to stop his charge and slammed him into the floor.

“Gah...agh!”

She paid no mind to the short scream. Instead, she bashed him into the floor a second and third time, paused, and did it again. The floor cracked, and the man’s face dug into its surface. His limbs flailed wildly with each slam. By the fifth time he was smashed into the stone floor, the man had completely lost consciousness, and Momo decided to drag him along as a shield.

By the time she turned the corner, her would-be assailants were trembling in terror of what they’d just witnessed, their Guiding guns lying abandoned on the floor.

“Eek! H...help—”

Momo silenced the cowards with a swift kick to the face.

She didn't care if they begged for their lives. She beat them up at random and stomped their guns into scrap metal. Since they were forbidden contraband, it wasn't easy to acquire them in bulk. She assumed that was probably all they had as she moved forward.

When she entered a large room, there were some noncombatants cowering in the corner, presumably having missed their chance to get away. Perfect. She grabbed one of them and interrogated him while pressing her coping saw against his forehead, and he quickly spilled everything he knew.

Just like that, she'd gotten the information she needed. Momo had him lead the way to the office with important documents in it, where she grabbed a few stacks of paper and riffled through them.

"Aha. Bingo."

The knights were supposed to bring up the rear after Momo's attack, but just to be safe, she took some images as proof with a recording conjuring.

Once she'd recorded the members and source of funding, she headed downstairs. The monstine in question seemed to be made with some special production equipment.

She'd noticed the stairs to the basement on her way here. Most of the workers had already either been beaten up or run away, so the manor was quiet. She knocked out the person who'd guided her and calmly headed toward the basement.

By the time she reached the bottom of the stairs, the air was almost disturbingly cold.

The room was large and rectangular. It was a ceremonial hall shaped like a coffin, a symbol of death. There were crests carved into the walls that formed all kinds of pictures.

Within the coffin-shaped room were smaller, individual coffins. The images on the walls represented the world after death. These were commonly seen in ceremonial halls related to the Concept of Original Sin.

And here, instead of a coffin, there was something far stranger in place.

“.....Ugh.” Momo wrinkled her nose.

It was an iron maiden.

While on the outside it had the carved face of a woman, the inside contained sharp spikes. It was an infamous torture device and method of execution.

If it were only for decoration, that would be one thing. It would just exhibit poor taste.

But since it was in a ceremonial hall for Original Sin Conjurations, there was no way it was a mere decoration. Many of the Original Sin Conjurations required the sacrifice of a “pure maiden.”

Most of all, Momo detected the scent of blood.

There was a person inside. A living person, no less.

“So this is how monstine is produced? How disgusting.”

Shaking her head, Momo drew closer to the ominous torture device.

There were crests carved into the coffins. A mysterious, warped conjuration. Those used for the sacrificial ceremony were drawn with the iron maiden at the center. Momo couldn't read the finer details, but it was clearly an Original Sin at work.

A pill dropped from the lower part of the iron maiden with a clatter. Momo recognized it as the red pill called monstine.

Clearly, whoever created this was not of a sound mind. *They're obviously insane*, Momo thought as she undid the latch and opened the iron maiden.

Inside the torture device was a little girl.

She might have been ten years old, or maybe even younger. And yet, this small child was so covered in blood that to call her injured would be a gross understatement.

Her eyes barely seemed to see anything. She was so exhausted from pain that she couldn't even make a whimper of anguish.

Noticing light outside the dark iron maiden, the girl reached out her hand.

Letting out a groan, her unsteady hand touched Momo's palm. Even if she couldn't see, she could at least detect the softness and warmth of a human touch. Her hand gripped Momo's weakly.

"Mmm..." She let out a breath of utter relief.

A faint smile emerged on her lips. It was a childish, cherubic smile, with the pure trust normally reserved for a mother, or the mischievous glee one might share with a friend.

Then she spoke.

"...Mmmom."

With that, the last of the strength left her small body.

As the girl expelled her last breath asking for her mother, the weight of her hand grew heavier. She slouched forward, and Momo gripped her hand tightly.

But the girl didn't squeeze back.

"....."

Even Momo, who was usually uninterested in anything but Menou, felt compassion for a young life lost so tragically. She couldn't possibly leave the girl like this. Just as she moved to extract the small girl's body from the iron maiden...

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Iron Maiden, Crest—Invoke [Explosion]

"What?"

She didn't even have time to be surprised.

The Guiding Force stored in the production vessel activated the crest, causing the Iron Maiden to explode. Spikes flew in every direction. The force of the explosion sent needles flying toward Momo.

It was almost point-blank distance. Since she was leaned in to pull out the little girl, she couldn't possibly avoid them all.

Momo wasn't nearly fast enough to activate the barrier crest in her priestess robe. She just barely managed to use Guiding Enhancement and defended her

vital points with her arms. Several of the spikes scratched Momo, and one pierced her side. Momo grimaced in pain.

“Whoever set this up was awfully sadistic...”

It was a booby trap. Someone had set it up so that removing the girl from inside would activate a conditional crest and set off an explosion.

The strangest part was that it activated not when the iron maiden was opened, but when she removed the victim inside. Not only had the person responsible shut a little girl into a vile torture device, they had even used her as bait to set up a nasty trap.

Swearing, Momo pulled the spike out of her side. Fortunately, the wound was shallow. Still cursing to herself, she turned around to leave.

Then her legs faltered.

It wasn't because of the pain from the wound. She hadn't lost enough blood to affect her consciousness. And yet, her legs were suddenly shaky. It was a strange feeling, as if something was eroding away her spirit.

“It was coated with poison...!”

Momo clicked her tongue furiously. There had been poison on the iron maiden's spikes.

“Whoever did this really is the absolute worst...!”

She scowled as she realized her own blunder.

All of this occurred the day before.

The morning after the ball at Libelle Castle, Menou visited the church.

Her pace was usually calm and collected, but today she was rushing in a near-panic. She couldn't even fully compose her expression; the faint lines under her eyes betrayed her exhaustion.

There were two reasons Menou was in a fright.

One was that Akari had disappeared the night before. She'd been searching for her almost nonstop, but Akari had been gone without a trace since Manon Libelle's party. This couldn't possibly be a coincidence.

And there was one more reason.

Menou rushed into one of the sickrooms of the church, where Momo was resting. Lying in bed, she looked pale.

“Darli—”

“Don’t sit up.”

Momo tried to rise to greet her, but Menou didn’t want her to waste any energy. She quickly put her hand to Momo’s forehead and furrowed her own brow.

She was burning. An abnormally high fever and drenched in sweat. Her breathing was ragged and her eyes unfocused.

“.....Poison, huh?”

“Yeah...” Momo’s voice sounded weak. “I’m...sorry... There was a kid, and I... let my guard down... I slowed...you down, darling...”

“You don’t need to apologize.” Menou shook her head at Momo, who looked guilty in spite of her awful state.

This was Menou’s mistake. She had placed too much responsibility on Momo. They didn’t have any information about the enemy’s forces, yet she sent Momo into their base anyway, assuming she would be fine.

“Just rest up and preserve your strength. Don’t worry. I’ll stamp out those scum from the Fourth.”

“...Okay.” Looking relieved, Momo quietly closed her eyes.

It must have been hard for her even to talk. As soon as her eyelids shut, Momo drifted off to sleep. But it couldn’t exactly be described as a peaceful rest. The poison was still eating away at her body.

Menou wiped the sweat off Momo’s forehead, then stroked her hair gently, brushing it into place.

She couldn’t ask Momo for any more help with this situation. As she left the sickroom behind, Menou made a rare display of fury, letting out a low growl.



“Now they’ve done it. Oh yes...they’ll pay. Damned scum...!”

Menou stormed toward Sicilia’s office. At this point, she couldn’t even be bothered trying to sneak around quietly on her own. What she was about to do was outside the realm of her duties.

But she didn’t care. Menou threw open the door to Pastor Sicilia’s office.

Sicilia looked up inquisitively at Menou, who’d entered without so much as a knock.

“Welcome. I suppose you’re done visiting your aide?”

“Yes. Just to confirm, her life isn’t in any danger in her condition, correct?”

“She’ll be fine. I believe her immense stores of Guiding Force have helped slow the spread of the poison to a shocking degree. It does seem like she’s suffering more because of it at present, but we’ll be able to neutralize the poison before it bears any threat to her life.”

“Thank you very much. I’m sorry for the inconvenience. Please let Momo rest here a little longer.”

“Of course. It’s part of the Faust’s duty to care for priestesses.”

Sicilia accepted Menou’s request without any indication that she expected anything in return.

“And about Akari, who we discussed the other day... Akari Tokitou, that is, has gone missing. Given the situation, I have to assume the Fourth are involved.”

“I share responsibility for that as well. I took my eyes off her at the ball when that pillar of fire appeared. Allow me to offer you my apologies, and some helpful information.”

“Do you have a lead...?”

“Yesterday, an elderly member of the Fourth’s inner circle gave himself up. He insists that Manon Libelle has taken over the Fourth and is causing all kinds of problems. It’s not clear why Akari Tokitou is missing, but given the timing, it’s reasonable to guess that Manon Libelle was involved.”

“...Then it’s even more important that we resolve things as quickly as possible.

I'm requesting a lockdown of Libelle Island." Menou looked directly into Sicilia's eyes. "We'll annihilate the Fourth. Let's round up all the members and major players and capture all of them immediately. My assistant brought in all the proof we need. There should be no shortage of evidence."

They would destroy the Fourth infesting Libelle, roots and all.

The Fourth in Libelle had harmed Momo—who was an Executioner even if only an aide—and kidnapped Akari, an Otherworlder. They were now officially enough of a threat that they had to be crushed before they could do anything worse, no matter how hurried the methods.

And most of all, Menou herself wouldn't allow them to go on any longer.

How dare they lay a hand on her one and only junior and assistant? What did they think they were doing with her traveling companion, Akari?

She wasn't letting it show in front of Sicilia, but Menou was absolutely furious.

Menou wouldn't hesitate to make full use of her authority as an Executioner and destroy them without a trace. If she couldn't do that alone, then she would use Sicilia's authority as a pastor. Seeing Momo's condition, they had plenty of proof to crush the group for the activities they were doing under the guise of the Fourth.

"While Libelle Island is being locked down and surrender demanded, I'll infiltrate the castle and capture Manon Libelle and the other leaders. That will put an end to all of this."

The proof Momo had recorded was very thorough.

She had the sources of their funds, their secret accounting books, a list of members, and images of the crimes they were committing in the basement. She'd even confiscated some physical evidence. All of it was more than enough to justify the priestesses from the Faust and the knights of the Noblesse making a move.

In Libelle, there was cooperation between the two social estates. That was due to the efforts of Pastor Sicilia.

“...This is unexpected.” Sicilia removed her glasses. She wiped the lenses, then put them back on. “So you do know how to depend on other people...unlike Flare.”

Menou blinked in bewilderment.

Abruptly, she remembered the events in the ancient capital of Garm. Maybe she had unwittingly been influenced by the things that were said to her that day.

“Pastor Sicilia...do you know my Master?”

“Yes, we met a long time ago. She told me I was incompetent right to my face. You and I have met as well, in fact...but I suppose it makes sense you wouldn’t remember.”

What had happened in the past? Menou couldn’t read any particular emotion in Sicilia’s bland expression.

“Didn’t you suspect me to be behind this? Are you telling me that you never once wondered whether I might be the one pulling the strings behind the scenes of this whole affair?”

“I did.” Menou had just recently been lured into a trap in the Archbishop Orwell incident. Of course she couldn’t trust someone else just because they were both members of the Faust.

So naturally, she’d been investigating since she first arrived in the city. She’d considered the pastor’s quick actions since the whole affair began and the fact that she’d already made arrangements to cooperate with the knights. She worked hard and was trusted by the other priestesses, too.

“I investigated, made contact, and determined you were worthy of trust before I made this proposal. Pastor Sicilia, you are an outstanding priestess. Which is exactly why I’m asking for your help.”

“...Thank you.”

That was the first time Sicilia had ever thanked her.

“In this case, we should certainly be able to get the Order of Knights to cooperate.”

The only road to the port city was blocked off.

Libelle Island was home to many from the Noblesse, as well as the majority of the Fourth. With the road closed, there was nowhere for them to run. Some had already surrendered, but the rest had shut themselves up in Libelle Castle.

“Well, this is bothersome.”

Manon gazed out from the castle at the blockade keeping them from the mainland. Contrary to her words, she didn’t actually look bothered in the least. In fact, she was smiling as though enjoying the situation.

Having seen the blockade for herself, Manon went into the meeting room to amuse herself with the remaining members of the Fourth, who were panicking. She was expecting them to be kicking up a fuss, but the meeting room was deathly silent.

The members were all stopped in place.

“Oh my.” Manon’s eyes widened in surprise.

Every single Fourth member in the room was frozen in an unnatural posture. They weren’t moving an inch, just emitting a faint glow of Guiding Light. Their breathing and even their heartbeats had stopped.

Time itself had halted for them.

Something very strange was happening here. Amid the people frozen in time stood a single girl.

“Good to see you again, Ms. Manon. I’d like to ask you a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

It was Akari who emerged from the shadows. She had changed out of her priestess robes from the night before and into her normal clothes.

Manon smiled coolly. “Welcome, Ms. Akari. Please, have a seat.”

She was welcoming the sudden intruder with open arms. Akari’s brow furrowed.

“...You’re not scared?”

“No. You said you wanted to ask me something, didn’t you? I have nothing to

hide, so all I have to do is answer honestly. By all means, let us talk.”

Akari cautiously sat down in a chair. She was confident that she could stop Manon if she tried anything. The power of *Time* had almost never failed her.

Whether she knew what Akari was thinking or not, Manon simply smiled.

“Now, please go on. What did you want to ask me so badly that you even left Ms. Menou’s side?”

“Last night, I let myself into your room and the castle office, but I couldn’t figure anything out, so I’ll just ask you directly. Why did you know who I am?”

“Because I’d heard about you.” Manon answered effortlessly, compared to Akari, who was wording her question with care.

But her response didn’t seem to reassure the asker. Akari’s wariness only deepened.

“You heard...what about me?”

“I’ve heard that you made the world *Regress*.”

Akari’s gaze sharpened.

After all, it was time itself that she had *Regressed*. Someone who was acting closely with Akari, like Menou or Momo, might be able to guess what had happened, but it would never occur to anyone else. And it would be downright impossible to know for sure.

Yet, Manon revealed even more.

“You’ve already made the world *Regress* once or twice at the very least, correct? I was told that you’ve reversed time for the world on several occasions.”

She was correct, although there was no way she could possibly have known. It wasn’t just once that Akari had *Regressed* the timeline of the world. It was because of her countless failures that Akari’s goal was now to be killed by Menou. No one but Akari should be privy to that information.

“Who told you all this?”

“Pandemonium,” Manon replied frankly. “If I told you that I’d undone the seal

that's been on that fog for a thousand years, would you believe me?"

"...I wouldn't."

"That's absolutely correct. I'm lying, of course. That's not the sort of thing someone like me could do anything about."

Then what was the point of the lie? Akari was still trying to figure out Manon's objective.

"I don't know what your goal is, Ms. Akari, but... Well, I imagine this is the first time we've met. I doubt I could have caused something like this all on my own, after all."

"....." Akari nodded silently.

The events that occurred in the port city had always been extremely minor until this time around. There was no such thing as monstine involved. A small group in Libelle calling themselves the Fourth picked a fight with Menou and lost. That was all there was to it. It was an incident Menou could definitely handle on her own.

So why had it turned into a massive incident where humans turned into monsters and Momo was taken out of commission by poison?

"I don't know all the details, but I know you're attacking Menou to take revenge for your mother. There wasn't any information in the office, but before I used *Suspension* on these people, I heard them talking about it a little."

"Taking revenge, huh...?" Manon tilted her head thoughtfully as Akari gave her a searching look. "I suppose that's not untrue. But you're a little off the mark, so let me explain in detail. You see, my mother was a lost one."

Manon's statement made Akari freeze in place.

"Your mother was...?"

"That's right. But she wasn't summoned like you. She was guided here by the stars, a lost one in the truest sense of the phrase."

Manon's mother was a woman who had genuinely stumbled into this world by chance, instead of being summoned by someone else like most Otherworlders.

“Evidently, it’s difficult to sense disturbances in the heavenly and earthen veins in this area, perhaps because it’s so close to Pandemonium. So the Faust failed to notice my mother’s arrival. The members of the Fourth were beside themselves with excitement, I’m told. Finding an Otherworlder before the Faust does is practically unheard-of.”

Her voice didn’t contain any underlying notes of emotion.

Otherworlders, in the end, were humans with extraordinary powers. And this was at the height of the Fourth’s heyday. If they could get this person to join them, they would have a serious secret weapon at their disposal. So Count Libelle took her into his custody in secret and made a social position for her by marrying her.

“In other words, I am the child of Count Libelle, a native of this world, and a lost one.”

However, Manon’s father never asked her mother to use her powers.

Why? The reason was simple: The use of Pure Concepts eroded the user’s memories.

Her father was afraid of that. He didn’t want her mother to lose any of her memories. He was too afraid of the possibility that she would forget about the time he’d spent with her.

For at some point, Count Libelle had fallen in love with the lost one—deeply, hopelessly in love.

Her father’s influence was the reason Manon wore a kimono. He bought up any relics of the ancient civilization that he could find. The reason objects related to the ancient civilization were so sought-after in Libelle, even those that were practically junk, was because Count Libelle was collecting them.

So instead, he pushed the role of using power onto Manon.

If an Otherworlder’s child could inherit their power, then he could convince the others in the Fourth that there was no need for Manon’s mother to use her Pure Concept.

“They hoped I would be born with power like my mother’s, but to make a

long story short, things didn't work out that way. If I had been able to have a Pseudo-Concept, if not a Pure Concept, then it might have been different...but I was a fairly ordinary child."

So, the people around her were disappointed and occasionally whispered among themselves: *"What a bummer. She's just a normal girl."*

Parents' gossiping inevitably reaches their children, so Manon was soon ostracized from the other children's groups. Libelle Island was small, with the extended Libelle family accounting for at least half the population. Once they decided she was a failure, she was shunned by all.

When most of them rebelled against her parents for supporting the outdated beliefs of the Fourth, they certainly didn't take Manon with them.

"Then, around ten years ago, a visitor called Flare killed my mother. Purely because she was an Otherworlder."

"...And did you do all this just to get at Menou, because she's the successor to the person who killed your mother?"

"No, I think that occurrence itself was inevitable. I loved my mother, but I understand why the church asserts that the Pure Concepts of Otherworlders are dangerous, too. So it made perfect sense that they felt they had to kill her."

It was Manon's father who grieved her mother's death the most.

Manon still vividly remembered her father's anguish when her mother died. That was why his mental condition had been on the decline ever since. As his only child, Manon gradually began to prepare to take over his duties.

When her father collapsed, she was quick to accept the situation. She didn't feel sad, not even over the fact that she felt nothing about it.

Since she had always been expected to have something she didn't, Manon had long since given up on expecting anything from others.

"So my revenge isn't directed toward Menou. It's directed toward all of the Fourth." Manon pointed at the frozen members. "I wanted them to realize just how powerless they are. I backed them into a corner so that they would be fully aware of how meaningless their existence is. And... Yes, I suppose I wanted to

become taboo.”

Akari knit her brow at the casual confession. “That’s just weird.”

“Really? In what way?”

“What do you mean, ‘In what way’...?”

It should have gone without saying what was bizarre about Manon’s desire to be taboo.

“I mean, taboo is just a means to an end,” Akari said.

For instance, Archbishop Orwell had committed it to try to escape from aging. And the king of Grisarika Kingdom had summoned Otherworlders like Akari to oppose the Faust.

Taboo was nothing more than a means to accomplish a goal.

“...Ha-ha. I suppose that’s true.” Manon chuckled elegantly. It sounded as if she was genuinely amused at herself. “But personally, that’s my only wish.”

There was a certain nihilism in Manon’s voice that was hard to place as she stared frankly at Akari. Her voice was thick with cynicism.

“The expectations of adults can be unreasonable. No matter what you do, they won’t acknowledge you unless it’s exactly in line with their expectations.”

When Manon was young, it didn’t make any sense to her.

She did even better than she was told to do. She excelled more than any of the other children. But all she got in return was disappointment. No matter how hard she tried, how much she succeeded, or how long she wondered what she was doing wrong, they still wanted something from her that she couldn’t acquire through learning—until Manon’s heart twisted, warped, and finally broke.

“Really, it would’ve been better if I had rebelled against them. But I wanted to live up to their expectations. I wanted to give them everything they wanted. Isn’t that normal?”

Manon stood up. To Akari’s confusion, she produced a red pill from her sleeve, crushed it, and put the powder on her finger.

“Children can’t help trying to live up to the expectations of the adults around them.”

She touched her finger to the floor and rubbed the powder in, drawing a crest. The twisted red writing seemed to reflect the state of her wretched heart.

“My revenge is to live up to their expectations at last and show them how foolish those expectations really were. I’m in the middle of my teen rebellion now, after all.”

Once she’d drawn the shape on the floor, she connected the crest to the people who were still frozen. Akari wrinkled her brow. They were frozen by Akari’s conjuring right now. No other kind of conjuring should be able to affect them.

“The way I see it, people are born twice. The first time is when they come out of their mother, birthed crying into the world. And the second time is when they leave their parents and learn to stand on their own. I was a child, but in becoming an adult, I will take back my self-worth from the people around me. However...there is a surprising number of people who aren’t able to be born that second time.”

She couldn’t become the person she wanted to be. Couldn’t make herself into what other people’s expectations made her think she had to become. She polished herself, conquered her surroundings, and became more exceptional than anyone around her, yet Manon still couldn’t get what she had strived for.

“There is no point in going on the way I am right now. And so I will become taboo.”

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [I found a wee little shadow.]

The summoning circle she’d drawn on the floor produced an Original Sin Conjuring.

Manon’s shadow began to lose its form. It spread out and began swallowing up the people in the meeting room.

One by one, Manon’s shadow absorbed and broke down the people who were under Akari’s *Suspension*, as if devouring prey. And in fact, it really was

eating them. It swallowed up their bodies, spirits, and even souls, acquiring their power.

Akari's eyes widened at the scene. "How is this happening...?"

Suspension was a conjuring that also protected its target. As long as time was stopped for them, they couldn't be affected by outside forces.

And yet, the conjuring that had just been invoked ate through the power fueling Akari's Pure Concept and used them as sacrifices.

For a moment, Akari couldn't move. She was never the sort of person who could quickly react to unexpected situations. The reason she was able to act so calm during the Garm incident, for example, was because she knew exactly what would happen. She had experienced it several times already, so she was confident she could get through with the help of her Pure Concept of *Time*.

But this experience was entirely new.

The unfamiliar scene slowed her thinking. It wasn't just that she didn't know what was happening—she was also seeing her conjuring being broken. It was too much for her to process.

Manon's shadow swallowed up everyone else in the room with no regard for the *Suspension*.

"It appears my power is greater than yours after all." Manon smiled in satisfaction.

It wasn't that Akari had never encountered anything that her conjurings using *Time* couldn't affect. In the ceremonial hall in Garm, the white droplet hadn't stopped even when Akari used *Suspension*. But that liquid was taken from the Starhusk, the site of one of the Four Major Human Errors...which meant that this phenomenon she'd just witnessed had comparable power.

"Now then, Ms. Akari."

Manon's shadow took on physical form and began to rise. By sacrificing the people in the meeting room, it had gained access to this illicit power. The roiling shadow wrapped around Akari's foot. She still couldn't move, her thoughts frozen by the unforeseen turn of events.

Manon smiled sweetly and opened her fan.

“It appears your time is up.”

Just then, a dagger flew toward her neck.

The moment she saw Manon capturing Akari, Menou immediately threw her dagger.

Since she was familiar with the place after the evening ball, it was a simple matter to infiltrate the castle. However, it looked like she was already too late.

It was obvious from one glance at the meeting room what had happened here. Manon Libelle had sacrificed the members of the Fourth and put their power into her shadow. And now, perhaps intending another conjuring ceremony, she was reaching for the captive Akari.

It was an illegal conjuring that filled not the body but the soul with the Concept of Original Sin. At this point, Manon was already closer to a demon than a human. There was no longer any cause to keep her alive after committing such a crime.

So Menou immediately shifted her focus.

She threw her dagger at the back of Manon’s neck.

It was a full-strength throw without any warning, but Manon reacted instantly. She opened the fan in her hand and knocked the dagger away.

It was an iron fan: a means of self-defense that looked perfectly harmless. The fact that she carried such a thing must have meant she didn’t trust anyone around her. Calmly analyzing her opponent, Menou moved closer to Manon.

She’d started running as soon as she threw the dagger, her boot stomping over the shadow, which tried to restrict her movements. Moving with fearless footsteps, Menou managed to catch the deflected dagger in midair and drove it toward her opponent’s breast.

Manon reacted accordingly. She blocked the blade with her iron fan and moved her shadow again. The darkness at her feet was now an extension of her, one she could move freely without a care for any light source.

Menou spotted a shadow spiked like a spear moving toward her. She dodged

to one side and lashed out with her blade—as a feint. Then she spun herself around.

A spinning kick.

The sole of her boot drove toward Manon, but she blocked it by using her shadow as a shield.

Neither side had taken damage from the first volley of attacks.

But Menou had accomplished her goal.

She used the recoil from her kick to propel herself backward, within reach of Akari. Manon had used the shadow inching closer to Akari to block Menou's kick. As soon as the girl was free of the shadow's grip, Menou scooped her up in her arms.

“M-Menou...”



As she murmured in shock, tears began to spill from Akari's eyes. Menou looked at her, startled.

"Ah, um, this... It's not what it looks like... P-please don't think...that I'm being weird..."

"All right. I'm sorry, Akari. It's my fault for taking my eyes off you. I underestimated how easy a target you are for abduction."

Akari must have been truly terrified; her words were nearly nonsensical. With an apology, Menou gave her a push toward the exit of the room.

"Hurry up and get out of here. Leave the castle and head toward the edge of the island. Pastor Sicilia or one of the knights will look after you."

"O-okay."

Akari was uncharacteristically obedient. Menou had half expected her to insist on staying in the thick of battle or something, as she did when they were caught by Orwell, but this time she said nothing of the sort. She just wiped her tears with her palm and scrambled away.

In fact, it was almost as if she was running from Menou.

That was a little strange, but Menou was facing off with the enemy. She had no time to focus her attention on Akari.

Once she confirmed that Akari had fled, Menou turned her gaze back to Manon.

She was a quiet-looking girl with indigo hair in a loose braid. Her expression was far too serene for someone who had just killed a decent amount of people in cold blood; there were no traces of guilt, excitement, or fear to be found in her face. It wasn't as if she was concealing her emotions—rather, it was like they were nonexistent.

Turning toward the girl in the kimono, Menou readied her dagger.

"Manon Libelle. I'll be executing you now."

Manon had already crossed the line. She'd offered up the people here as sacrifices, invoked an Original Sin Conjuring, and turned herself into something

not entirely human.

“Nicely said, Ms. Menou.” For some reason, the mastermind behind this entire affair smiled as she stood at the other end of the executioner’s blade. “Hearing you say that has made it clear to me: I have finally become free. I’ve been liberated from the people who kept me in chains without even allowing me to realize I was bound. Yes. Oh yes, indeed. Your blade has shown me the truth at last.”

She boldly faced Menou the Executioner. “I’m now a true embodiment of the Fourth.” No shadow darkened her smile. “Unlike those geriatrics who were driven by their own selfish desires...I seek the liberation of the world, for freedom and independence, just as the Fourth are meant to believe.”

She firmly planted a hand on her chest and went on. “What does it mean to be born into the Noblesse? What does it mean to have a peaceful society? The so-called peace you Faust enforce is the reason my mother was deemed a taboo entity and killed. The Noblesse spat on me as a disappointment. And the Commons, indifferent, will not even look at me. This world has locked my life away.”

Manon’s life was dictated by the foolishness of the Noblesse.

And the pridefulness of the Faust, and the complacency of the Commons. She was a victim of this world’s three-estate system and all of its flaws.

“And so I have chosen to become taboo and fight back against it.”

Manon had grown up doing as she was told. Without a doubt, her freedom was continually taken from her by not just the people around her, but by the system itself, which had existed for a thousand years.

Thus, Manon Libelle felt she had no choice but to become taboo herself to rebel.

“I have gained taboo powers to fight with the world. I believe that is the ultimate form of the Fourth, who claim to champion freedom and independence.”

The girl who was more deserving to call herself part of the Fourth than anyone else in this town laughed lightly.

Menou. Flarete. The Executioner.

As her dagger glinted, Manon had a vision of the past.

“You have a big sister, you know.”

Manon’s mother used to whisper such things in her ear when her father wasn’t around.

Evidently, she had a half sister by blood: a child her mother had when she was in Japan, before she met Manon’s father.

Of course, the fact that she had an older sister a world apart from her didn’t really mean much to Manon. But she remembered that her mother often looked sad about the other daughter she’d left behind.

“Your big sister was a bright, cheerful, energetic girl.”

When they were alone, her mother told her these stories.

Unlike the other adults around her, Manon’s mother didn’t have any baffling expectations of her.

She simply loved Manon, in order to bury her sadness about having lost another daughter. Manon realized that whenever her mother looked at her, her eyes were seeing right through her into someplace far away.

Manon clearly remembered the moment her mother was killed.

There was no warning. The two of them were talking together.

And then, suddenly, a blade went through her mother’s chest.

A small spray of blood hit Manon’s cheek, warm and wet. And at the same time, something happened to her mother’s outline.

Guiding Force: Connect—S?T?i?K???Pure Concept [Consume]—

Purple Guiding Light burst out of her mother, and a conjuring was starting to take form when a voice spoke.

“You’d better hold that back.”

When had she appeared? The priestess holding the blade that was still pierced through her whispered something in her mother’s ear.

"If you let that loose here, your kid's gonna die, you know."

Her mother's eyes widened. Her lips trembled, and she quickly bit down on them. The fading light of consciousness suddenly returned to her eyes, and she gazed at Manon.

It felt as if she was looking directly at Manon, and only Manon, for the first time.

The conjuring that was about to be invoked dispersed. The red-headed priestess pulled the dagger out of her mother's heart.

Then her mother crumpled to the floor. Manon reached out to her gingerly.

She was dead. Blood seeped out of the corpse. As the puddle of blood grew bigger, her body temperature grew lower. In the midst of her confusion, tears began to spill from Manon's eyes. The red-haired priestess glanced at her just once, then turned away.

"...I—I found it."

This was the answer.

The conjuring that her mother had started to unleash when she died. That was what all the adults wanted from Manon, she realized.

She was supposed to be next. That blade should be piercing her heart next. And when she died, surely she, too, would release something powerful from her body. She had finally found what everyone had wanted from her since birth, what she could never find, the reason for her despair.

"Please wait."

And so she desperately tried to stop the priestess. In that moment, Manon probably really did want to die.

"...Seems like I'm fated to get saddled with annoying kids lately." The priestess sighed. *"I might be a killer, but I'm not a slaughterer. I'm a pure, proper, and powerful priestess, you know. Why should I have to kill a little kid?"*

"B-because I'm my mother's child!"

Even she didn't entirely believe what she was saying. It didn't make sense. If

her mother was a taboo entity who deserved to be killed simply for living, then she must have deserved the same, since everyone had expected her to be the same way.

If she was her mother's child, she must not belong in this world. That was why everyone was so cold toward her.

"You're not taboo." The red-haired priestess tucked her dagger back into the sheath attached to her boot as she rejected Manon's belief. "Let me explain something to you. Pure Concepts attach to Otherworlders' souls. And unlike physical traits, the soul isn't hereditary in the least. It belongs to the individual. So even if you have Japanese blood, your soul won't have a Pure Concept attached, not even a Pseudo-Concept."

"Ah..."

How was Manon supposed to respond to that?

She couldn't put it into words. All she knew was that even if she kept on growing up in the same way, the disappointment of the people around her would never go away.

There was probably no one in the world who could understand the futility she felt in that moment. Manon was confronted with the nihilistic emptiness of her own life. All this time, she had searched so naively for a way to live up to the adults' expectations, never once doubting that it must be inside her somewhere.

But it wasn't.

Manon had grown up staring into an empty void.

As soon as she became aware of her own meaninglessness, something inside her snapped. Watching the light leave little Manon's gaze, the red-haired priestess narrowed her eyes.

Then the priestess turned and departed. She never appeared again. There was a gaping hole left behind in Manon's heart, a rift remaining where the blade she had been expecting to pierce her chest never appeared...ever since that moment when she was lit by the Guiding Light leaving her mother's dying body.

She desperately wished she could redo that moment.

And so, as she gazed at the Executioner's blade that had returned to her ten years later, Manon's heart danced.

"Come now, Ms. Menou."

Manon's shadow began to bubble upward.

Imbued with a physical presence, it turned into multiple blades and sped toward Menou. No, not just her—it began attacking and destroying the entire room almost indiscriminately.

The floor gave way.

Menou and Manon both tumbled downward.

When they landed, they were in a spacious dance hall, the same place where the party had been held the evening before. Without any tables or decorations, the hall was hauntingly empty.

"Let us fight to our hearts' content."

Silently, Menou sped forward. Manon smiled widely as she welcomed the other girl's attack.

As soon as she heard that Flarette had arrived in this town, she'd had a feeling. She felt sure to the point of relief that Flarette would come to kill her, just as Flare had killed her mother.

When she finally met Flarette, she was different than Manon had imagined, but even more captivating than she had hoped.

What an unusual, unstable girl. What pitiful expressions she sometimes wore. Though she put on an act of resolve and absolute faith, the truth was that she was constantly hesitating. Yet, despite her inner conflict, she never strayed from her path, and the aim of her blade was always true. She held firm in her heart something that Manon had gradually lost along the way.

She was like a sharp, thin blade, always polished to perfection and boasting an incredible edge, yet all the more brittle and easily broken because of it.

Menou's movements were swift, logical, and precise as she chased Manon

down. The more she was backed into a corner, the more Manon's body felt strangely light.

The blade known as Menou would surely pierce Manon's heart.

And in that moment, Manon had no doubt that she would become freer than anyone else.

"Hyah!"

There was the clash of metal on metal. Menou threw her dagger with a sharp exhale, but Manon blocked it with her iron fan. Within moments, Menou had drawn the dagger back into her hand with a Guiding Force thread and attacked again. *Good*, thought Manon. *More. Keep going. It's not over yet.*

She moved the shadows that had by now become an extension of her hands. The inky blades danced around the room at random, attacking everything in sight.

It was a seemingly random attack, designed to disguise her real aim.

Menou scowled. *You're a nasty one*, her expression seemed to say. In response, Manon smiled mischievously. *Making your opponent upset is a basic battle tactic*, she answered silently. Manon's wild attacks broke through the wall of the dance hall; as it crumbled, sunlight shone through and illuminated her.

Menou slipped back into the shadows to put distance between them, though likely not out of an aversion to the sunlight.

The Executioner was staring straight at Manon. Her gaze felt incredible. Looking back at the brilliance of those pale eyes, Manon shivered irresistibly. *Now, what will you do next?* Her thoughts were just starting to heat up when she witnessed something strange.

The outline of Menou's body suddenly blurred and became hard to see, even though Manon was looking right at her.

"Oh? What's this?"

She narrowed her eyes and soon realized what was happening.

Menou's colors were blending into the background.

Guiding Camouflage. It was a technique that used the light emitted by Guiding Enhancement and altered its colors to the user's will, creating an illusory effect. Since Menou was able to use this secret technique without relying on a crest or scripture, it was her ace in the hole.

Manon didn't know the particulars of how Guiding Camouflage worked, but she could at least surmise that it was an optical illusion created by changing the appearance of Guiding Light.

She tried to counteract it, but too late. She had completely lost track of Menou's movements as soon as she blended into the background. In seconds, Menou was directly in front of her.

The dagger drove deep into her shoulder.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—

As she struck, Menou sent a surge of Guiding Force into the dagger's crest. Manon knew immediately that she had no way of stopping the conjuring.

"It's over."

Invoke [Gale]

The crest engraved into Menou's dagger created a burst of wind from the blade buried in Manon's flesh.

"Ah, oof!"

Her arm swelled up at once, like a balloon inflated too fast. The wind pressure from inside the wound was too much, and her shoulder blew open, her arm flying off completely.

"O-oh, dear me...ngh!"

Menou mercilessly grabbed the wounded Manon and lifted her by the neck.

She felt her throat closing up. Menou's body was glowing with Guiding Enhancement. Manon was lifted high off the floor, away from her shadow, so that she could no longer make it move. She was out of options.

The fight was over.

It hadn't been much of a fight in the first place. But truth be told, that was

exactly what Manon had been hoping for. She was satisfied with this end, in her own way.

At the very least, it was much better than living out the rest of her life without doing anything at all.

If she had any regrets, she supposed there was a tiny part of her that wished she could have played with Menou a little more.

Her face twisted up in pain as she began to suffocate, Manon still choked out a laugh.

“It’s been fun, Ms. Menou.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“...Oh, please don’t make that face.” Manon winced as she chuckled.

There was no mercy in the hand that gripped her throat, yet somehow, Menou was wearing a hurt expression. Looking at her, Manon finally understood.

She didn’t really want to kill anyone.

“Say, Ms. Menou. Haven’t you ever felt this way? Sick of your parents, sick of all the bossy adults? Wondering why these people think they can order you around, why they’re always getting in your way...? Haven’t you ever gotten so sick of it all that you just can’t stand it?”

The mastermind behind the chaos in Libelle revealed her ridiculous motive.

It was like the confession of a little girl who’d been caught running away from home. But in truth, it really was nothing more than just that.

“Because I certainly have. Something that’s existed since before I was born decided the course of my entire life. I thought that was just awful. I am my own person, you know. I loved my mother very much, but I was still myself, not her.”

With nowhere to run and no way to resist, Manon nonetheless ranted on.

“And yet, I was bound by the expectations of others, to the point where I don’t even know what I want to do myself. Isn’t it ever so foolish to determine the course of your life based on how others want you to be? That’s why I turned

to the darkness.”

Becoming taboo. Being set free.

To Manon, those two things were one and the same.

“It’s dreadful to be saddled with a role, isn’t it? That’s why when people in this world want to be set free from some kind of fetters, they turn to taboo.”

And what was the goal of that taboo? It didn’t take long for her to come up with an answer.

“People sometimes come from another world to this one, just as my mother once did. And throughout the course of history, they have been given the duty of bringing about change. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Her life was draining fast. On the verge of her death, Manon spoke with the fervor of a believer who has received a divine revelation.

“The Pure Concepts they are given are part of the Concepts that rule this planet. These are powers created by the energy of the planet and by human history. Do you understand? When a lost one visits our world, they are given a specific power to act as a catalyst for change that the people of this planet want them to bring about. At least, that’s how I see it.”

It was a wild theory. Confronted with this strange new point of view, Menou furrowed her brow, though she didn’t lessen the strength of her grip.

“Many of them are summoned for the selfish desires of others, though,” she countered. “Your mother may have arrived here by chance, but that is not the case for most who find their way into our world.”

“Perhaps, but the people who summon these Otherworlders are seeking change, too.”

There was no hesitation in Manon’s response. She was steadily losing blood from her ruined shoulder, but the more her life force drained away, the stronger her conviction became.

“No matter how big a political force in this world might be, there is still a means to call upon a power strong enough to destroy it. We need strength from the outside to change. We need encounters that make us question what’s

normal and natural. Just as I could not change without becoming taboo, there are things in this world that cannot change without these types of forces involved.”

Manon was living proof that even if a Japanese person had a child with someone of this world, the child would still be a native of this world as well. It was impossible to inherit a Pure Concept from an Otherworlder.

“Otherworlders—with their power, knowledge, and ideas—are revolutionaries sent by this very planet.”

They were humans, too, but their roles were different.

“And yet, for the past thousand years, we’ve repressed this world. Ever since the ancient civilization that Otherworlders created was destroyed, the Faust has stood at the top of our world and reigned supreme. They’ve even dealt with Otherworlders, the outside pressure provided by the planet, and forcibly brought peace to the world. Which is exactly why change is so desperately needed.”

“Are you that unhappy with this world?” Menou asked.

“Of course I am. Peace robs us of freedom and independence. It creates more and more people like me. The more there is peace, the more the world will stagnate and rot.”

She was losing focus, perhaps from the blood loss.

“Without a doubt, the Faust are the rulers of this world. We need an impetus from the outside to open the lid that they’ve been forcing down on us. Just as you provided a spark from the outside to the Fourth in this town, Ms. Menou, there is a real need for an outside force strong enough to break through the massive shackle restraining this current world. No matter how much damage is caused in the process...even if it devours entire islands, carves holes in the earth, and sinks a continent into the sea.”

“There is no such force,” Menou responded. “No matter what taboo might come about, Executioners will continue to dispose of them. If you wish for change, then go through the proper procedures, and pay in your own blood. There is no reason that can justify sacrificing others.”

“But isn’t sacrificing others your entire job, Ms. Menou?”

“Yes. I’m a villain, after all.” Menou sounded firm, but she looked hurt by her own words.

Seeing this, Manon chuckled. “...Heh, I see. But things changed a thousand years ago. Didn’t they? And the force for change in that case was an Otherworlder, too. So I think you can change, Ms. Menou. After all, you have one by your side as well. You, too, have the right to rebel against the world.”

While Menou held fast to her role, Manon spoke as one who had cast aside her duties as a member of the Noblesse and fallen to sin.

“If you wanted to change, I’m sure that girl by your side would be happy to lend you her strength anytime.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Menou raised her voice for the first time.

“...My, you’re surprisingly easy to read, Ms. Menou.” Manon’s eyes widened for a moment, then she smirked. “As I said to Ms. Akari, I believe people are born twice. So in order for you to be born again, there is something you must overcome... Ah, but then again, I’m told this is far from the first time... So maybe it’s you who will have to change Ms. Akari in the end. Otherwise, everything will stay the same.”

“What in the world are you going on about?”

“It’s a secret. I’m somewhat decent, believe it or not. It’s common courtesy to keep another girl’s secrets. Besides, you’re already too late, Ms. Menou. You see...you’ve chosen the wrong person to chase.”

The corners of her lips rising mischievously, Manon spoke to someone other than Menou. “You can come out now. I’ll offer myself to you as my final sacrifice.”

There was no one else around but Menou and Manon. What was she talking about? Or was she going mad in the final moments before her death? Menou furrowed her brow—

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Happy birthday to me.]

There was a flash of deep crimson.

“...What?” Menou’s eyes widened when she realized where the red light was coming from.

A sense of dread flooded her body, setting her hairs on end. Slowly, Menou looked down from Manon’s smiling face to the girl’s stomach.

There was a hand there.

A little arm had burst through Manon’s stomach and out of her body.

“You were too late from the very beginning. This all started long before you even arrived in this city.”

The small hand tore open Manon’s stomach, ripped through the obi that held her kimono in place, and reached toward Menou.

It came out up to the forearm, then the upper arm. Just as the bloodstained fingertips were about to touch her, Menou flung Manon away.

Manon’s body hit the floor and rolled over so that she was facing upward, the arm still reaching out of her stomach. Manon kept smiling quietly, unfazed by the impact at this point.

“The reason I was spreading that monstine is because of this little one here. Think about it, won’t you? How in the world would one young girl like me create monstine without the Faust noticing?”

Manon squeezed the hand that was reaching out of her stomach.

The little hand squeezed back.

“Hee-hee. The whole thing is absurd, don’t you think? This little one came along without any help from the meaningless research conducted by the Fourth. And then she met me, of all people. It seems, to me, a little bit like fate.”

The little hand that had gripped Manon’s swung up and down energetically.

“Well, please give it your best, Ms. Menou. Unlike me...this girl is going to be far too much for you to handle.”

Those became her last words.

The other hand broke through her ribs and burst out of her body.

The two hands tore mercilessly through Manon's abdomen. Her ribcage opened wide, spilling her organs onto the floor and filling the room with the stench of fresh blood.

Manon's body was opened from the inside out, like the door of an iron maiden.

"Phew!"

A cherubic little face emerged from Manon's broken remains.

The girl who had crawled out of Manon's stomach gulped in air like a newborn fawn and stretched out her limbs.

She looked as sweet as a baby. Her round face didn't show even a trace of malice as she squinted into the sunlight pouring in through the broken walls.

"Wow, the sky's so big and blue! The weather is so nice today!"

The girl stretched her arms out wide, celebrating the day with a sunny smile.

She had elegant features and the posture of a properly raised young lady, despite her age. The dress she was wearing had probably been pure-white at one time, though now it was dyed completely red with Manon's blood. She reached her hand out toward the sky with an innocent expression.

"Just look how sunny it is outside. It's going to be a great day for sure! Don't you think—? Aww, that's right. I guess you're dead, huh?"

The girl, who looked no older than ten, had black hair and equally dark eyes.

Those jet-black eyes and hair could only mean one thing. The girl whose small frame was covered in flesh and blood looked down at the body of Manon, who had died as she crawled out of her body. She spoke in a soft, loving tone.

"Thank you for everything. You gave me a decent number of sacrifices. You can rest now."

Then the little girl looked up at Menou and clapped a hand to her mouth.

"Oh my! There's a new person here."

As the girl expressed her surprise in a way that was both polite and somehow

very calculated, Menou thought she recognized her round face.

She'd seen it in the scripture conjuring Momo recorded.

The girl looked exactly like the one Momo had found trapped in the iron maiden. The very same little girl who had supposedly breathed her last in the embrace of that torture device now waved at Menou brightly.

The blood-soaked little girl spoke with an innocent smile.

"Hi there, lady. How's that pink-haired girl from yesterday doing?" she asked.

 Maiden Bathed in Blood

As soon as the blood-soaked little girl appeared, Menou made her move.

She didn't hesitate or try to figure out who exactly this girl was. She just took the initiative.

Activating Guiding Enhancement, Menou was engulfed in the glow of Guiding Light as she closed the distance between them and slashed the girl's throat with her dagger.

"...Mm?"

The girl, whose throat had been cut, fell backward with a dazed expression on her face.

Fresh blood sprayed through the air.

The small girl's body crumpled to the ground, blood seeping from her slashed neck into the floor. A fatal wound. But of course, Menou didn't let her guard down. The girl had fallen far too easily compared to the bizarre way she'd first arrived. There was no way killing her would be that simple.

There was obviously much more to this girl than met the eye.

The reason Menou didn't hesitate to immediately go for a killing blow was that the option of trying to capture the girl hadn't even occurred to her. Anyone who came crawling out of another person couldn't possibly be a normal human. There was no way she was the innocent little girl she appeared to be.

Menou's judgment was, of course, correct.

The girl's throat had been cut wide open. The gash Menou left was deep. Foaming blood bubbled up from the girl's lungs through her larynx and frothed out of the wound.

Then, suddenly, a hand reached up through the gash.

“Ngh!” Menou gasped.

As she watched, a second hand violently ripped the trachea open and emerged. The arms emerging from the girl’s throat pushed the wound open further as though trying to make a bigger exit.

With audible gnashing and tearing, the hands ripped open the wounds, pushed through the flesh, and bore through bone, tearing up the corpse until a little girl exactly like the dead one came crawling out.

“Mm-ah-ah, don’t be hasty. We haven’t even gotten started yet, have we?”

Emerging from the gaping hole in her own dead body, the little girl chided Menou cheerfully.

Her own corpse was at her feet, or perhaps it was more like a cast-off husk. Either way, that body had been living moments ago. Now it was gradually starting to melt away, as if its purpose had been served.

While the dead body decomposed, the second little girl who wore the very same face was perfectly unharmed.

The entire display was so grotesque and surreal that it would have made anyone lose their minds. As the blood drained from her face, Menou almost felt faint for a moment.

But this was reality.

Focusing on her pounding heart and her tunneling vision, Menou licked her lips. She took in a short breath and slowly exhaled.

That was enough to restore balance to her mental state. “I feel like I’m going crazy...,” she grumbled.

“No, not yet. It’s the next part that’s really going to be crazy funny. The starting bell hasn’t even rung yet, you know?”

While Menou carefully maintained a level head and even tone, the little girl giggled, soaked red with her own blood.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re...a demon that Manon summoned.”

“Course not! I’m a real human girl from head to toe, see?”

Though she said this with a smile, it was clear she was no ordinary human.

“I see... I suppose you must be human, yes.” Menou chose her words carefully even as she cursed on the inside.

She should’ve realized something was off about the footage Momo brought back.

The spikes of the iron maiden trap that Momo triggered were coated in poison. Logically speaking, that meant the little girl inside shouldn’t have been alive in the first place. But she had survived being impaled by poisoned spikes because she was evil incarnate.

Perhaps the girl standing in front of Menou really was human. But even if that were true, she was still a taboo among taboos, more insidious than any demon or devil could ever hope to be.

Her use of these unbelievably terrifying conjurings was proof enough.

There was no doubt about it: This girl had to be an Otherworlder with a Pure Concept. In fact, she was the worst kind of all—a dreadful being who crossed beyond being called a lost one. Menou darkly muttered the special name of the calamities that caused such harm to the world.

“A Human Error...!”

Standing in front of her was the shadow of what was once an Otherworlder.

This was what happened when an Otherworlder used up all their old memories, cast off their humanity, and became the very incarnation of their Concept.

Her cherubic appearance meant nothing. Even on the inside, she was nothing more than a false image. This little girl had transformed into a Pure Concept, right down to her bone marrow.

In this case, the Pure Concept the girl was using was probably some form of sacrificial summoning-based conjuring. It was safe to assume that she used her own death as a sacrifice to summon herself. Killing this girl was essentially the same as offering her a sacrifice.

In other words, this girl couldn’t be killed. She was immortal, albeit through a

different means than Akari.

“...This is bad.” Menou gripped the handle of her dagger tightly.

Frankly, this girl’s command of her Pure Concept was so thorough that it wasn’t even worth comparing to Akari, who had still only recently come to this world. What kind of Human Error was she? Menou had a feeling she knew the answer, but she didn’t want to say it aloud.

A single verse from the scripture crossed her mind:

The Concept of Original Sin was born from the wild thoughts of a single girl and spilled forth from her flesh and blood.

Anyone familiar with the concept of taboo knew these words, which seemed to fit the girl in front of her all too well. If Menou’s hunch was right, then this was the worst scenario imaginable.

“What’s with the scary face, lady? Come on. Just enjoy the ride.”

“What about this could I possibly enjoy, monster?”

“Mmm, a monster? Ouch. I practiced really hard while I was inside that girl and finally got the hang of talking. So let’s chat some more. Please?”

She took one step, then two, then three.

The little girl entered Menou’s range with carefree footsteps and leaned in close.

“Tell me, what’re your favorite hobbies? I like singing, and dancing, and watching movies! You can kinda practice singing and dancing on your own, but I’m so sad I can’t watch movies. What about you, lady?”

“Hobbies, hmm? I don’t really have any.”

As the little girl actually started a meaningless conversation, Menou responded quite bluntly.

Surprisingly enough, she didn’t sense any hostility from the girl in front of her. She didn’t even seem angry or unfriendly, never mind murderous. In fact, she looked for all the world like a perfectly ordinary little girl coming over to have a chat.

“Aww, that’s a shame. Hobbies make life worth living, you know? You should try to enjoy life more.”

“I’m far too busy to waste time on hobbies. It’s my job to kill people like you, after all.”

“Mmm! You? Kill me?”

“Yes, my goal is to destroy you. Your Pure Concept, that is. That’s the whole reason I exist.”

“Mmm, so you want to destroy my Pure Concept?”

Standing close enough that Menou could have reached out and patted her on the head, the harmless-looking girl looked up at her with wide, rounded eyes.

Then she started shrieking with laughter. The little girl seemed delighted by the threat of being killed.

“Wow, you say such funny things! You can kill me if you want, you know. It happens all the time. See, I’m super weak, so I die a lot. But I’m pretty sure you can’t destroy me.”

She was like a child who’d been given a new toy, accepting Menou’s threat like a present to be celebrated and played with. This strange reaction only put Menou even more on edge.

“If you think you can destroy me, just try it, okay? No one in this world has managed to do it, not even the *Ivory* hero, but go ahead and try!”

“The *Ivory* hero?” Menou furrowed her brow at the unfamiliar title.

“Mmm, you don’t know?!” The girl put her hand over her mouth in an exaggerated show of surprise. “But it was so amazing! The strongest, greatest, most powerful Pure Concept ever! The ‘White’ that brings purity and normalcy to the world!”

The little girl spread her arms wide and raised her voice. “Clouding the *Star* in the north, turning the *Dragon* to white salt in the west! Chasing the *Vessel* in the east far into the white night and sealing me in the white fog in the south! *Ivory*, the hero who destroyed and sealed us away and saved the world! The one who betrayed us when we tried to cast this world aside! Mm, but it wasn’t

that person's fault!"

She was speaking and gesturing with an air so dramatic it was somewhat out of place. The girl carried herself like a performer starring as the tragic heroine in a one-act play as she went on.

"That person was our friend, our comrade, our hope—and also the guardian of this world! The Pure Concept of *Ivory* got stuck with the role of protecting this stupid planet! That person's own desires didn't even matter anymore...!"

Her voice shook with sadness, and she lowered her head.

Then she abruptly looked up again, wearing a bright smile without a trace of grief.

"But now I get it. Everyone forgot about the hero. After all that hard work! Even though the hero got totally used up, it still slipped your mind!! ...You know, I think that's why I hated all of you so much."

Menou replayed the girl's words in her mind.

The *Star* in the north, the *Dragon* in the west, the *Vessel* in the east... She guessed the girl was talking about the Four Major Human Errors.

The *Star* in the north must be the Starhusk. The *Vessel* in the east was the Mechanical Society. Menou wasn't sure how the Sword of Salt in the west became a *Dragon*, but this all happened a thousand years ago. It made sense that the little girl's version might not line up with modern interpretations of the Human Errors.

At any rate, if what this girl said was true, it would mean that when those four infamous Pure Concepts threatened to destroy the world, they were stopped by a fellow Pure Concept holder called *Ivory*. In other words, an Otherworlder had saved this world.

Even Menou had never heard of such information. According to the church's records, the Four Major Human Errors were sealed or destroyed by the church at the time.

But more pressingly, there was an important phrase in her story that held a clue to the girl's identity.

“You said you were sealed in the ‘white fog in the south.’ Does that mean you’re...?”

“Mm, calm down. You said you’ll destroy me, right? I’m really happy! It’s been so long since someone seriously tried to do that to me. If you really mean it, let’s have an exciting, super-fun fight to the death! I’ve gotten so sick of doing nothing but eating my own kind!”

Interrupting Menou’s question, the girl held the hem of her dress and gave a refined curtsy.

“Thank you for coming today, and I wish you an auspicious day and good health! Please strike me, smash me, crush me to your heart’s content! There’s plenty more where that came from, so no need to hold back! Let’s see you really go crazy!”

She looked up from her deep curtsy and straightened out her spine.

It was like the introduction of an actress standing on stage as the curtain rose. As she gave this strange and unfamiliar speech to Menou, the girl reached her head up higher. She put a hand under her chin and slowly lifted it.

“What you’re about to see is the greatest B movie of all time. A game of chance where the devil rolls the dice.”

Of course, her head didn’t rise any higher than her neck. But still, she kept pushing it upward.

Soon, there was the snapping sound of fleshy fibers stretching. The girl’s smiling face went higher and higher as her neck stretched unnaturally. Muscle fibers have a certain elasticity; her neck slowly stretched out, just like it might on the corpse of a hanged man.

And it didn’t stop.

“Demons! Monsters! Demon lords! Devils and mysterious, monstrous gods! What will the roll of the dice bring next? You’ll just have to wait and see!”

Her skin, veins, and flesh went past their limits, snapping and tearing as her head went higher. Slowly, her head and neck were being separated from her body.

At last, there was a final crunch of bones breaking apart.

In the same moment, the girl twisted her own head sharply.

And her head came off completely.

Blood sprayed from the place where her head had been torn off by brute force.

The girl's now-headless body collapsed to the ground. Her severed head, still smiling, rolled across the floor like a grotesque die being cast.

It was a completely unfathomable action. A suicide that went beyond abnormal.

Menou looked up wordlessly at the fountain of spraying blood.

As she dazedly looked on, the head rolled to the edge of her vision and landed looking up at the sky.

Then, the gushing blood before Menou's eyes took on a red glow of Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Can I call a hundred friends?]

The fountain of blood cut through space itself.

On the other side of the newly formed rift in the air was a dark abyss. The unnatural amount of blood gushing out of the girl's neck transformed into an empty void that connected to the abyss.

What formed was none other than an entrance to the Concept Dimension of Original Sin.

Blood, flesh, and the fabric of space tore open, and monsters began to ooze out from the abyss.

One after another, an endless parade. No two monsters were alike. Even Menou, an Executioner, had never seen the likes of the monsters that appeared.

These summoned monsters immediately began devouring the little girl's body. Her flesh and blood had been offered up as a sacrifice to them, after all.

And there was no better sacrifice for these creatures than a pure maiden.

The innocent little girl's body was consumed by the monsters in moments.

One of the monsters suddenly began to tremble. It shook violently and opened its mouth wide as if it was about to vomit something up.

Out of the monster's gullet slid an unharmed little girl.

It was a girl of no more than ten years of age, with refined features and a white dress. She looked exactly like the little girl who had just been eaten.



She was a true menace, beyond even the most devilish mastermind. As the little girl was reborn out of the monster's body and stepped onto the floor, she spread out her arms and smiled.

"A triple threat of fear, excitement, and thrills! The singing, dancing embodiment of a disaster movie! Yes, I am none other than Pandæmonium—mass of monsters!"

The Human Error who had once nearly destroyed the world had now been reborn in Libelle.

"Hrmm..."

In the knights' station in Libelle, Ashuna heaved a sigh.

It was a languid, gloomy sigh, a far cry from her usual self. The monstine incident was moving swiftly toward resolution. Libelle Castle had been sealed off. No doubt this was all the result of Momo's attack on their base yesterday. She'd gotten enough proof that they could act on it.

But the arranged time of their meeting came and went, and Momo never showed up.

A member of the Fourth was being interrogated at the knights' station. It was an old man who had turned himself in as soon as the island was sealed off—a central figure from the organization.

"I'm telling you, the head of the Fourth is now Manon Libelle! We're just victims! That girl dosed us with monstine and forced us to do her bidding!!"

The man insisted in a shrill voice that Manon Libelle was behind it all.

Instead of assisting with the interrogations directly, Ashuna was contemplating her next course of action.

"What should I do...?"

She was more concerned with Momo's well-being than the developments with the Fourth. Knowing Momo's personality, Ashuna assumed the girl would have come to brag about her success, even though she tried to act blasé. She was the sort of person who liked to assert dominance whenever possible.

So since she didn't show up, there was a good possibility that something had happened to Momo the night before. But Ashuna Grisarika wasn't the type to act just because someone had potentially been defeated in battle.

Ashuna was a devout believer in strength. It was not the strength of a group that she desired, but the strength of an individual.

If she had failed in her attack the night before, that meant Momo was weak. It would be proof that she was a disappointment, and Ashuna had encountered someone last night who was at least as interesting as Momo was anyway.

But Ashuna had taken a liking to Momo.

"Ashuna, come over here."

In the back of her mind, Ashuna thought of her older sister, who was around the same height as Momo.

Few who knew her now would believe it, but Ashuna had loved painting pictures when she was little.

Ashuna was drawn to anything beautiful. She was always searching for beauty. The young princess wandered around the castle and beyond in search of subjects to paint, in search of sights that would tug at her heartstrings.

It was her eldest sister who kept an eye on Ashuna, who was a problem child in a much cuter way back then. She took young Ashuna's hand and introduced her to a knight.

"Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?"

The strongest knight on the continent.

When she saw that knight holding a sword, Ashuna abandoned her paintbrush and aimed to become a knight, too. She wanted to attain the beauty of strength for herself, instead of portraying it on a canvas.

Ashuna had natural talent. She quickly blossomed as a skilled knight and passed the exam with flying colors. She still clearly remembered what her older sister said to her that day.

"You have a real gift. But no matter how strong you become on your own, in a way, that doesn't mean anything. The true value of humanity is in a group."

Under the right leader, a group of humans can deal with any disaster. And so, Ashuna..."

Ashuna's older sister, who was a head shorter than her, smirked haughtily.

"I'll give you the honor of serving under me in my unit."

In the end, Ashuna was somehow irked by all this and ran away from the royal family.

It was a simple case of disliking someone too similar to herself. But the likeness between Ashuna and her sister was not as close as it seemed.

Ashuna was entranced by the beauty of individuals, while her sister was the leader of a group.

In all likelihood, it was her older sister who was better suited to royalty. Rebelling against her sister and her family, Ashuna roamed the kingdom, accomplishing so many deeds that she became known as the world-reforming Princess Knight.

But in the midst of all these glorious escapades, Ashuna noticed something strange.

No matter where she went, she found no trace of her sister's wrongdoings.

Surely there was no way her sister had never committed injustice or crime. Ashuna knew that her sister was a twisted royal of the Noblesse and an exceptional string puller. She had seen for herself that her sister had deep roots in the kingdom's dark side.

And yet, she couldn't find any proof of these darker activities. It didn't seem like they were being hidden so much as completely erased.

Ashuna's doubts finally grew to a point where she couldn't ignore them.

And then, about a month earlier, something happened...

The inquisition about the Otherworlder summoning incident targeted not her sister, but her father. Even when the archbishop was executed in the old capital of Garm, Ashuna's sister was still found innocent. At the very least, the inquisitors from the Faust had determined there was no proof that her sister had been involved in illegal activities.

“I don’t know what he got dragged into, but my poor father always was a fool... Honestly. With an older sister like mine, I always did wish I had a little sister of my own.”

Sounding uncharacteristically depressed, Ashuna muttered something that would probably send Momo into a rage if she heard it.

Resting her chin in her hands, she was wondering to herself whether she’d be able to ascertain Momo’s safety if she went to the church when something happened.

She sensed an enormous, almost venomous conjuring taking place.

“...!”

All the pores on her skin seemed to open to let out sweat. Her hairs stood on end, and goosebumps rose on her flesh. Ashuna’s sharp senses had detected a presence so intense, it almost made her nauseous, assaulting her with a grating discomfort she couldn’t ignore.

The closest sensation she could compare it to was what she felt in Grisarika Kingdom after she fell from the train while fighting Momo.

At the time, she sensed an indescribable wrongness. It was a deep disturbance, as if the world was being wrenched off course.

Her entire body shuddered as if a horrible monster was being born, ripping free of the planet’s womb.

It wasn’t just her imagination.

“If Manon Libelle is not stopped, I’ll turn into a monster, too. I’m giving you my testimony! You must arrest that girl before—ack?!”

The elderly man who was raging loudly about Manon Libelle suddenly trailed off.

A change was overtaking him. His elderly frame began to melt from the outside.

“Wh-what the...?” One of the knights murmured in horror.

It wasn’t just the old man. All the members of the Fourth who had been

temporarily restrained here were undergoing the same transfiguration. The people in custody melted down to their bones and lost their shapes entirely.

As chaos broke out in the knights' station, Ashuna turned her sharp gaze toward Libelle Castle.

"...That conjuring was coming from over there."

The Princess Knight grabbed her sword and headed toward the battlefield.

This was not a joke.

When the Pure Concept that had burst out of Manon's stomach revealed her horrifying identity, Menou shuddered.

"Pandemonium, creator of fog...!"

One of the Four Major Human Errors that had nearly destroyed the world, the legendary Pandemonium of the south, had been unleashed.

This was no bluff. That was all too clear with one look at her.

The little girl in front of Menou was a ghoulish monster that had been completely overtaken by a Pure Concept. It was no longer even accurate to call her human.

"Mmm? That doesn't sound quite right. I am Pandæmonium—mass of monsters. The one in *Ivory* created the fog, not me. Don't get us mixed up, okay?"

"...You mean the hero you were talking about before?"

"That's right!"

The little girl made a circle with her thumb and index finger to signal a correct answer. Everything the little girl in the white dress, this Pandæmonium girl, said was news to Menou.

Menou had never heard of such a hero. The word "ivory" made her think of what had happened to her hometown, but that was only ten years ago. It couldn't possibly be connected to the events that took place a thousand years in the past.

She looked at the little girl again.

If one entered the evil territory people called Pandemonium, one could never escape. As it turned out, this fog floating above the sea was actually a barrier that sealed away Pandæmonium, so Pandemonium was only the name of the site of the disaster's aftermath.

Pandæmonium, the girl who'd been sealed inside the fog's barrier, was the Major Human Error herself.

Just as she said, she was the very incarnation of evil. A monstrosity without a name.

Standing in front of this unfathomable threat, Menou gritted her teeth.

"Today is turning out to be an awful day."

She thought she had cornered Manon, the mastermind behind the incidents in Libelle, but look at her now. Manon's body had already disappeared without a trace. The monsters must have consumed her.

Beasts were still crawling from the rift Pandæmonium had created in space. There were more of them in a wider range of shapes and sizes than one might see even in the Wild Frontier.

"You think so? But the weather is so perfect—not a single white cloud in sight. Isn't blue such a brilliant color? I'm sick of seeing ivory."

Pandæmonium gazed up at the sky through the part of the wall that was broken from the fight with Manon. Then she stepped back abruptly.

"I mean, it's been a thousand years. Even you don't know about *Ivory*, and you're wearing a priestess robe... But I can still feel their presence just a little. Isn't that strange?"

Menou didn't have time to answer her question.

As soon as Pandæmonium stepped back, the monsters moved forward. Without any corpses left, their next target was the living human in front of them.

One of them charged at Menou, and she buried her dagger in it.

Menou's entire body was glowing with Guiding Light. Using the monster that had died instantly when she stabbed through its skull as a shield, she got low to

the ground and darted around to the next monster's back. It was difficult to tell from its bizarre body where its heart might be. She struck what appeared to be its neck with the hilt of the dagger and smashed its cervical vertebrae.

The summoned enemies weren't particularly strong; in fact, Manon had put up more of a fight. At the very least, it wasn't the swarm of powerful monsters from the legends.

The problem was their numbers. The rift in space through which the monsters came was still open, producing more of them in all shapes and sizes by the second.

Within moments, she had taken down the initial wave of monsters, yet their numbers showed no sign of slowing their growth.

Her top priority had to be closing the hole that opened up to the Concept Dimension of Original Sin.

Menou used Guiding Enhancement and her dagger crest to keep massacring the monsters as she began forming a scripture conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 12:1—Invoke [Strike the nail, strike the nail, all to give support.]

Guiding Light burst forth from Menou's scripture and formed into innumerable giant nails. They were made of power, closer in form to the spiritual world than the physical one.

The spikes of light that formed around Menou sped forward as if struck by a hammer.

One after another, they pierced through the monsters, forming holes in their bodies, souls, and spirits. On top of that, more of the giant nails struck either end of the spatial rift and sealed it shut.

"Mm!" Pandæmonium exclaimed in surprise at the simultaneous destruction of the monsters and the rift. Wordlessly, Menou lunged toward her, grabbing and dragging her to the floor without leaving room for resistance.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

If she was immortal, it only made sense to restrain her instead. Menou

produced Guiding Thread from her dagger's crest, held the girl's wrists behind her back, and tied her so that she couldn't move.

No ordinary human would be able to escape from these tight bonds. Even the members of the Fourth whose bodies were strengthened with monstine hadn't been able to get out of the tough, thin thread when it was wound around them.

Menou, however, wasn't about to let her guard down. This was a Pure Concept given humanlike form. Restraining her with thread was hardly sufficient.

"Oh no, I can't believe I was caught so easily...but you better watch your back!" Pandæmonium was dumbfounded for a moment, then glared boldly at Menou. "Defeating me isn't enough to save the world! I'm nowhere near the other three! After all, I'm Pandæmonium, the weakest of the Four Major Human Errors..."

So this is the end of it?

As the restrained girl spouted what could only be interpreted as frustration at her own defeat, Menou began to feel a little hope—but that was quickly shattered into pieces.

"...But the evilest, too!"

That voice came from behind her.

A chill ran down her spine. Pandæmonium was right in front of her, still restrained by her thread. She was living, breathing, talking, and smiling.

Menou slowly turned to look at the source of the voice.

Pandæmonium was standing there, too.

There were now two of her.

"....." Menou stared back and forth between the two girls.

The only difference was...nothing. It wasn't a matter of which was fake and which was real. Without a doubt, both were the real thing.

As Menou sat there frozen, Pandæmonium slid past her and walked toward herself.

“I can’t believe I got caught. I’ve got a long way to go.”

“I’m sorryyy. I can’t help it. I’m weak.”

“I knooow. I’m you, after all.”

The two identical girls pressed their foreheads together, acting overjoyed at their reunion. They put their hands together and wrapped their arms around each other like twins expressing sisterly love.

This, however, was anything but a heartwarming scene of familial affection.

There was the sharp crack of bones breaking.

One of the Pandæmoniums had come closer to the other one’s collarbone. Just seconds after chatting happily with her other self, she wrapped both hands around her throat and snapped her skinny neck.

The Pandæmonium whose neck had been broken fell dead and melted away. The other, upon killing her own self, turned back toward Menou with a smile.

“Good job with the warm-up match, lady.”

There was nothing Menou could say.

Pandæmonium was the progenitor of all monsters and demons.

The Pure Concept of *Evil*, which had created the Concept of Original Sin that spread harm throughout the world.

Her thoughts turned into demons and created Original Sin, and her flesh and blood became monsters and scattered all over the world. Original Sin had brought about the destruction of a prosperous civilization a thousand years ago. The creator of conjurings that could destroy humanity smiled, looking innocent.

At this point, any ordinary priestess or knight would have lost all hope and gone mad.

But Menou didn’t waver. Her eyes were still filled with quiet determination as she pointed her dagger.

“You’re the one who tempted Manon into those evil deeds, aren’t you?”

“Mm! That’s a mean way to say it. ‘Tempted’ makes it sound like it wasn’t what she wanted to do of her own free will! I don’t think it’s very nice to write

off the feelings of someone who worked so hard and worried so much about her place in life.”

Pandæmonium didn't look guilty. In fact, she took on a scolding tone and wagged her finger admonishingly.

“I *helped* her, you know? I reached out a helping hand so she could live a better life. By the end, she knew exactly what she wanted to do. I think it was definitely a happy way to go.” The little girl smiled. “Sure, that helping hand was an evil one, but I am *Evil*. When people give in to the darkness, that's where I come in. She said it herself, didn't she? She turned to the darkness, and so I got into her. That's all there is to it.”

“And just reaching out a helping hand was enough to satisfy you?” Menou asked. “I saw the Guiding vessel used to create the monstine, so I know it was your blood that was used to make those red pills. By having them consume a part of you, you were able to get into other people and erode them from the inside, using those who took the drug as sacrifices to revive yourself. The entire monstine affair was all a ruse to get sacrifices for you, wasn't it?”

“You're half right and half wrong. It's not that I wanted to be revived—I just wanted to do a movie.”

“Do a movie...?”

“Uh-huh.”

Menou couldn't conceal her confusion. The girl's words were so unusual that it was hard to assess them properly.

“I told you, remember? My hobbies are singing, dancing, and watching movies! But this world doesn't have movies, you know? The church keeps all the conjurings for recording images and sounds to themselves. That means no entertainment! This planet is just so boring, so I decided to do the kind of movie I've been dying to see.”

Do a movie?

Menou understood the basic concept of the medium of film. As an Executioner, she was thoroughly educated on knowledge of a country called Japan, which didn't exist here.

But movies were for watching. She didn't understand how one could "do" a movie.

"What do you mean?"

"It's simple! Basically, I wanted to make a monster disaster happen in this port city, like from a movie. I was hoping to spread monstine and cause an epidemic of sorts...but you guys got in the way of that. So instead, I cast you as the heroine of the monster movie. You just have to run away desperately from me, the big scary monster," the little girl said with the absolute confidence that she was the predator.

Menou furrowed her brow. Manon's desire to become taboo was strange enough, but Pandæmonium's motivations were even more impossible to fathom.

"I don't think I understand. Turning the people of this city into monsters, causing chaos, trying to chase me around... How do you benefit from all this, exactly?"

"Benefit?" Pandæmonium blinked her big, round eyes. Her expression was that of a little girl who's been asked a confusing question by an adult. "I don't benefit from it, really. I don't care what you do, after all. Whether you live or die, the fate of one measly human doesn't matter to me. So how would I benefit from this?"

The Human Error that had once sunk the world into terror looked at Menou as if she didn't matter. Then she went on with a self-satisfied expression.

"Honestly, lady... You don't think you're some super-important person who the world can't go on without, do you? Ah, or do you think every single human life is unique and precious? That would be an even bigger mistake."

She spoke as if scolding a child who's grown too big for their britches.

"Listen—it's watching humans struggle desperately that's the fun part. So whether that results in the person living or dying doesn't matter. Don't you get it? What's important is the process! It's watching people put their lives on the line! Seeing them struggle for their lives is super fun!!" The girl held out both hands, her eyes glittering.

She didn't seem to feel a hint of compassion for humans. It was as if she was watching the world from the other side of a screen. The way she spoke like a celestial body looking down upon humanity was truly terrifying.

"There's no benefit. I'm just starved for entertainment. I wanna watch a movie with no director, where the whole cast is improvising, and where I get to laugh my head off. It's just a game for me, but you humans are putting your lives on the line, so it's really fun to watch! That girl, um... I forget her name, but her, too. It's the way she risked her life that made it worth seeing her die, you know?"

What exactly did she think humans were? Pandæmonium was the one who tempted Manon and lent her power, yet she couldn't even remember her name, laughing that her life was nothing more than a source of amusement.

"Mmm, don't get mad, okay? That's just what B movies are like."

As Menou seethed silently, Pandæmonium looked utterly unapologetic.

"See, there's gotta be a sudden disaster with no warning where tons of people die, and oooonce in a while, all the protagonists die, too, humanity is destroyed, and it ends in a victory for some grotesque monsters. You know, the kind of unsatisfying ending where you wonder what the point of the movie was. There's no catharsis or closure, just self-satisfaction for whoever made it. That kind of movie is a real gem that defies the meaning of entertainment, forcing the unfairness of reality on the audience."

The little girl's attitude was unchanged in spite of Menou's obvious rage. She twined her hands behind her back and carried on explaining her pet theory.

"But I think that's part of what makes a true monster movie. Big, giant monsters, appearing in huge numbers without any warning, that are way too strong for humans to beat! Monsters are supposed to be unfair! That's just reality! That's why people want a monster big enough to destroy reality itself!"

Pandæmonium stepped on top of a monster, held her hands out wide, and grinned. "Because reality, just like a monster, doesn't care what you want. Get it?"

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon

[Ghosts are real, too!]

Spirit bodies dragged themselves out of the monsters' corpses and stood in the world as ghosts.

"Go ahead! Try to entertain me, lady!"

"...I wish you wouldn't underestimate me."

The ghost monsters charged at Menou. Having shed the yokes of their physical forms, they could no longer be considered living beings, but they were trying to bite directly into Menou's spirit.

These imaginary life-forms weren't affected by most physical attacks, as they were only being solidified in the world by Guiding Force. They would be incredibly difficult to deal with for any human who could only use Guiding Enhancement.

But for Menou, they were no problem.

While souls without vessels could pass right through physical interference, they were that much weaker to the power in conjurings.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 9:3—Invoke [Know the hiding places of the wicked, and shine light upon them.]

The scripture conjuring mowed down the spirit bodies. The ghosts dissipated without any way to resist.

Menou glared at the little girl who was the cause of it all.

There were always conditions for making sacrifices and using living things as materials. Even a master of Pure Concepts couldn't offer up other people as sacrifices and use them as materials without any kind of process. Pandæmonium's conjurings were certainly grotesque, but they weren't impossible to counter.

The only question was how to destroy her.

"Pandæmonium. If I stop you, it will put an end to everything."

"Then try and stop me." Pandæmonium's eyes glinted red.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [The

rats go marching.]

The heaps of monster corpses melted into the ground.

In the next moment, there was a tremor. Something rumbled underground.

Feeling the ground beneath her quake, Menou activated Guiding Enhancement and leaped upward. Just as she sprang away, massive cracks formed in the floor of the dance hall.

“I am the lord of the monsters that lurk eternally in the dark. If you really think you can stop a beast like me, go ahead and try.”

A swarm of ratlike monsters burst out from the ground.

The monster corpses that had been offered as sacrifices had made contact with the earthen vein belowground, absorbed power, and been reformed with a sort of pseudo-soul and spirit.

They exploded like a geyser. The monsters gnawed through the floor, cracked the ground, and charged at Menou like an avalanche.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

As the giant rats bared their teeth and swarmed forward, they were repelled by the barrier Menou conjured.

“Mmm, a pseudo-church! How annoying!”

Guiding Force: Connect—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Invoke [Catch a monster by the toe.]

Pandæmonium’s eyes glowed red again. Judging by the construction, all Menou could tell was that it wasn’t going to be a sacrificial summoning this time.

The small girl’s body was bathed in Guiding Light. It was composed of power from Original Sin, creating a different effect from Guiding Enhancement.

As Menou cautiously wondered what she was doing now, Pandæmonium held out her left hand, still glowing red.

One of the summoned monsters chomped down on her slender arm. Then

another.

Menou's eyes widened. Pandæmonium's left arm was being devoured while she was still alive.

The rat monsters that had eaten the girl's arm swelled up in size. Pandæmonium had turned her own flesh into a strengthening agent and fed it to the monsters.

With their muscles swollen to the point that their skin was bulging out, the rats began to attack again, but they were still blocked by the barrier.

"Oh dear, one wasn't enough? Here's another, then."

Without hesitation, she dangled out her right leg with a smile.

In an instant, the girl's skinny leg was devoured to nothing, and the monsters grew even larger. The sudden growth nearly split their skin open, and a new pair of legs sprouted from their backs. Heedless of the destruction from their own extreme enhancements, the rat monsters gnawed frantically at Menou's barrier.

".....!"

The tactic was so grotesque, it was nauseating to watch. Pandæmonium's conjurings came with such horrific methods that no sane person would be able to use them. Did she not experience pain, or did she just see it as the last humanlike feeling left to her? Just watching her recklessly inflicting self-harm to invoke one conjuring after the next was enough to threaten one's sanity.

But then again, Menou had no intention of just standing there and watching.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

Still maintaining the wall, she invoked an attack conjuring.

A bell made of light formed directly above Menou. The rat monsters writhed in pain at the wrenching peals of power.

The bell rang out in every direction. A massive wave fanned from the conjuring in a wide circle, making it nigh impossible to flee. The monsters trying to gnaw through the wall of light flipped on their backs and kicked their legs in

agony.

The sound didn't seem to reach Pandæmonium, however. On a second look, it was definitely causing some damage. Each time the power rang out, Pandæmonium's small frame began to break, and blood spurted out of different parts of her body.

And yet, she didn't seem at all concerned about her own injuries. She smiled blithely as she watched the monsters she'd summoned struggle.

Crimson light covered the girl's body. With Guiding Enhancement strengthening her, Pandæmonium acted unaffected by the sound of the bell as she plucked off her remaining leg.

"Here you go. Number three."

She shoved her blood-dripping leg into the mouth of one of the writhing monsters.

At this point, the surviving beasts barely even resembled rats. They had grown new limbs at random all over their bodies. Their broken pelts had been shed, replaced by an armor of hardened muscle fibers. Their overgrown front teeth had turned into sharp blades, slicing their own lower jaws in two.

These powered-up monsters began regrouping, pushing against the deafening peals of the bell. Their bodies, originally the size of a fist, had swelled up to that of a large dog. Their countless limbs squirmed and clung to the outer wall of the pseudo-church, and they struck against it with their long, sharp front teeth, trying to chew through.

By now, they were past the point of excitement into a nearly deranged rampage. They crashed into the wall wildly, one after the other, with new monsters crushing the previous ones from behind. Stomping and squashing their own comrades, then being stomped and squashed themselves, they charged against the wall in waves.

Eventually, their insane assault began to create cracks in it.

But Menou remained calm.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it

is the path to the Lord.]

Following the outer wall of the church and the bell tower, a new wall formed with a main gate. In the meantime, the monstrous rats had swarmed over the faint cracks and began trying to expand the hole with their front teeth. The monsters' blood and sinew seeped toward the wall of light like goo.

Just before it got inside, the gate of light opened.

The swarm of monsters let out a screech.

The newly opened gate was producing a powerful inward pull. The monsters that had set foot within the wall were sucked toward it despite their grabbing teeth and crushed against the inner wall.

This multi-step conjuring had created the full form of a church. As Menou constructed and sustained all this with a grimace, the little girl with only one arm left looked on with a smirk.

"A triple invocation of a scripture conjuring. That's very impressive... But you don't have very much Guiding Force, do you?"

She'd seen through her.

After the long fight with Manon, Menou had invoked several of these already. Her flesh and spirit aside, Menou's soul was reaching the limit of power it could provide. Her Guiding Force was about to run dry.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [The big tall giant swings its arm.]

Pandæmonium's right arm swelled up.

Rewriting the structure of the human body, the arm stretched out like rubber and struck. Packing one powerful punch, the enormous arm broke through the cracked wall of light and sped toward Menou.

She was so focused on maintaining her conjuring that she couldn't dodge it.

"Ngh!"

Menou's body buckled and was flung upward. With her concentration completely ruined, the bell and gate vanished into thin air. The monsters that

had been trapped by the structure were let loose.

This is bad. An alert went off in Menou's mind. Pandæmonium's arm and the rat monsters—she had to deal with both, or she'd die.

A monster leaped straight toward her, its mouth wide open. Pandæmonium's arm swept toward her from above, swinging down to try and crush Menou's skull...until the arm was lopped clean off.

"Mmm!" Pandæmonium's round eyes widened.

Like a thunderclap, a thrown sword had cut through Pandæmonium's arm and landed stabbed into the ground.

It was a magnificent sword with an elaborate crest on the hilt. Moments later, the person who had thrown it landed on the scene. She grabbed the hilt and swung it to stop the front teeth of the rat monsters.

The crest on the hilt glowed vividly.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Invoke [Flameburst]

Fire blasted into the rat monsters' wide-open mouths.

"When I saw those people from the Fourth melting, I went running toward the source of the strangeness, but this certainly isn't what I expected."

As the monsters scattered, a voice so confident it bordered on arrogance rang out.

Her red-tinged golden hair fluttered, and her bared back looked so gallant as to be downright beautiful.

"You..."

"Nice to meet you, priestess...at least, let's just say this is the first time we've met, shall we?"

The woman who had rescued Menou from peril hefted her sword and grinned.

"I'm Ashuna Grisarika."

The wild tomboy of the Grisarika Kingdom, the Princess Knight, had arrived.

Pandæmonium's arm hit the ground with a thud.

Severed from her body, it disintegrated into dust and fell away. Having finally lost all four limbs, Pandæmonium shook her head in irritation.

"Mmm, mmm... Now I've got no limbs left. It's too bad I can't even greet this new visitor properly."

This seemed like a major underreaction to having no limbs. Ashuna glared at the bizarre creature known as Pandæmonium as she addressed Menou.

"Looks like you're fighting another absurdly difficult opponent...but what in the world *is* that disturbing thing? Just looking at it gives me the creeps."



“That’s Pandæmonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors.”

“Oh-ho.” Even Ashuna looked startled by Menou’s response. “Well, I’ll be damned. That’s just about the worst villain you could meet.”

To her eternal credit, Ashuna’s lips quickly lifted into a grin.

“Your Highness, did you say the members of the Fourth melted?”

“That I did.”

“Then that must be Pandæmonium’s upper limit.” Menou had figured out the driving force behind Pandæmonium’s conjurings. “She satisfies the sacrificial requirements by eroding the structure of people who have ingested a certain amount of monstine. The bodies, spirits, and souls of the Fourth, likely around a hundred people—she used their life force to power her Original Sin Conjuring.”

“I see. So we just have to kill her a hundred times, eh? That makes things nice and simple.”

A hundred times was probably an exaggeration. Pandæmonium had already drained some of that life force by summoning monsters and replacing her own body. More importantly, since she could still effectively be immortal by using her own body as a sacrifice to revive herself, it didn’t change the fact that she was impossible to kill.

But if they chipped away the strength she’d gotten from those sacrifices, then she wouldn’t be able to use any more power but her own. Since Original Sin Conjurings required sacrifices, their biggest weakness was that they couldn’t even be invoked without one.

Pandæmonium was a powerful opponent, but as Menou had assassinated many users of Pure Concepts before, she was far from being completely outmatched. She still had her scripture, too, unlike in the battle against Orwell. She could continue fighting.

Ashuna seemed to understand the situation, too. She’d seen through to the heart of the matter without asking any unnecessary questions.

“Let’s get down to it, then.”

“We can settle this with one blow. There’s something I’d like you to do, Your Highness. Conveniently enough, we’ve already made a hole.”

“Oh-ho?”

There was a glint of understanding in Ashuna’s eyes.

The cracks in the floor around them ran all the way through the castle’s foundation deep underground. This was where the summoned rat monsters had crawled out from.

So where did they lead?

“Just to be clear: Normally, people can’t control more power than their own inner stores of Guiding Force. Even if we draw out the earthen vein, it doesn’t seem like you’d have the capacity to do much with it. What do you think?”

Her voice was laden with both challenge and anticipation. Ashuna knew that Menou’s ability to manipulate Guiding Force was exceptional. But it was common sense that a person’s physical ability to control power was innately limited. An individual could only control as much Guiding Force as they had in their souls.

Ashuna’s tone, however, hinted that she suspected the person in front of her might be able to challenge that rule.

Menou responded without hesitation. “I can do it.”

When she was affected by a Human Error at a young age, Menou’s body, soul, and spirit were all blanched almost completely white. Her sense of the boundary between herself and the outside world virtually disappeared, which had the effect of allowing her to control power outside of herself as naturally as her own. Power had to be regulated by the owner’s spirit or there would be recoil, but when it came to using it without a spirit or soul, Menou could control it far past normal limits as long as she could touch it.

It was a property unique to a blanched-white soul—to no one in the world but Menou.

“My inner capacity for Guiding Force may be ordinary for a priestess...but the upper limit for the Guiding Force I can control absolutely outclasses yours.”

Ashuna gulped. “Well, that’s certainly intriguing. Let’s see it, then.”

The princess drew her sword, pointed the tip down toward the ground, and charged its crest with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Invoke [Expansion]

The sword grew, stretching down toward the bottom of the cracks—all the way to the depths of the earth, where the earthen vein flowed.

It was no coincidence. Pandæmonium had interfered with the earthen vein to create the rat monsters in the first place. Sharp-eyed as ever, Menou had realized this and called on Ashuna to utilize it.

The long, large sword created by the conjuring made contact with the earthen vein. They had a connection.

“Here we go. It’s all yours!”

Guiding Force: Connect (via Slash Expansion)—Earthen Vein [Power]—Invoke [Guiding Force Manipulation]

The earthen vein bent to her will.

Magnificent, chaotic, and utterly dependable. The power that Ashuna had twisted out of shape with her direct Guiding Force manipulation hit Menou head-on.

Any ordinary person would have undoubtedly been blown away. It was like being struck by a flash flood. Without the reinforced defenses of Guiding Enhancement, the torrent could have damaged her body, spirit, and even her soul.

Menou quietly closed her eyes and entrusted herself to the power.

Instead of controlling it, she was accepting it as part of herself. Its flow permeated through Menou. Her body and soul became one with the power of the earthen vein, and Menou’s spirit took hold over its flow.

As its power gushed upward, it took on a clear purpose and stretched toward the sky.

This was a form of cooperation unlike when Menou connected directly with

Akari's Guiding Force and drew it out in Garm. Nor was it the same as ceremonial conjurings in which multiple people worked together to interfere with the earthen vein from the outside.

Menou was entering the earthen vein, assimilating into it.

It was a form of manipulation that far exceeded the limits of an individual, and it was only possible for Menou, who had lost the boundary between herself and the rest of the world.

"Ha! That's incredible." Ashuna looked on in admiration at Menou's technique.

It was a beauty to behold.

Usually, if part of the earthen vein were to burst out of the ground, it would diffuse into its surroundings. There was normally no way to control this sheer power, but now it was being concentrated and shooting into the air, from the ground to the sky. Even the spacious dance hall was too small to contain it. Its power pierced through the ceiling, destroyed part of the castle easily, and turned what was once indoors into the outdoors as it followed the will of Menou's spirit.

In moments, a pillar of Guiding Force had formed, connecting the earthen vein to the heavenly vein.

"Mmm!"

An aorta that linked heaven and earth. Pandæmonium gazed up at Menou, floating in the center of the pulsing pillar of Guiding Light, with a strangely wistful expression.

"...She does remind me a bit of *Ivory*."

Those words didn't reach Menou, who was in a state of extreme focus.

Within the pillar of light, she opened her eyes. Using the power she controlled as part of her own self, she began to construct a scripture conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:2, Full Passage—Invoke [Beyond the mountains, there was nothing to be found in the plains below. Nothing but a wasteland stretching out forever. Morning, afternoon, and night; there was no

change to the withered plains. The exhausted people were at a loss. Boom. Boom. An echo. The people looked upward to see a woman. The people were confused. The woman said nothing. Her mouth closed, she raised her arm and struck with the hammer. They gathered around her in wonder. All eyes were focused on the woman. She raised her arm again. In order to do what must be done: Drive in the stake and make known the ground where all shall begin.]

It was a pseudo-church constructed using the earthen and heavenly veins.

This was the very same conjuring that was used to assassinate the Pure Concept that once destroyed Menou's hometown. The former Archbishop Orwell had constructed this extremely complex scripture conjuring on her own. This time, Menou was expanding its scale even further.

The barrier swelled outward, forming a majestic holy church large and powerful enough to cover the entire island.

"Mm-mm, amazing. You've got me beat in terms of effort—gggh!"

Pandæmonium's gleeful voice suddenly faltered.

She was being pinned down by a force so strong that she couldn't even complete her casual comment.

The bell rang out over and over, solidifying the binding barrier. A space formed around the girl that prevented her from moving an inch, crucifying her in the empty air.

The pseudo-church barrier that bound the body, soul, and spirit was one of the most powerful conjurings in the scripture. Since it drew Guiding Force from the earthen vein and connected to the heavenly vein in an endless cycle, it was permanently rooted in place here.

Pandæmonium was silent now. It would be impossible for the little girl to move an eyelash under the crushing weight of all that power, let alone open her mouth.

"That's it, then? For one of the Four Major Human Errors, that was surprisingly easy... I suppose your conjuring was just that incredible."

"She was a powerful foe. To be honest, the fact that there weren't too many

sacrifices definitely helped.”

Menou and Ashuna left the castle and walked toward the road that led off the island.

Their expressions were bright as they spoke lightly to each other. They had just defeated one of the legendary Four Major Human Errors after an incredibly tough battle. Neither of them was the type to blithely celebrate a victory, but they were certainly enjoying the sense of satisfaction.

A considerable amount of Libelle Castle had been destroyed by the blast of the earthen vein. The entire place might even need to be demolished.

“All I have to do now is leave the island long enough to strengthen the barrier. I’ll consult with the pastor about what to do with Pandæmonium from there, but you were an enormous help.”

“Oh, don’t mention it... By the way, er, you know.” Uncharacteristically, Ashuna mumbled for a moment before asking, “Is Momo all right?”

That was unexpected.

Even beyond the fact that she had somehow deduced that Menou and Momo were connected, it was Ashuna’s attitude that surprised Menou the most. She wasn’t interrogating or making demands. In that moment, she was simply worried for Momo’s well-being.

Menou wondered for a moment if she should feign ignorance, then wryly decided there was no point in that now.

“She’s fine. She was poisoned and collapsed, but she’s in the church, resting —”

Something cut their conversation short.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Koi replica, up above the world so high.]

The ground burst open.

Menou and Ashuna were thrown into the air by a sudden force from beneath their feet. The pseudo-church constructed from Guiding Force was blown into pieces. *What just happened?* Even as they were flung upward, the pair quickly

looked around, but what they saw was difficult to believe.

“...Huh?”

“What in the...?!”

It wasn't just the barrier that had been broken. The two hardened warriors wouldn't have been so alarmed by such a simple sight.

A giant monster had appeared and blown away the entire island that Menou had turned into holy ground.

Once she made it to safety, Akari was escorted to a room in the church.

Sicilia was fully aware that Akari had a Pure Concept, so she took great pains to ensure Akari wasn't agitated in any way.

Thus, Akari, still in the same state of full awareness, sat in the room and waited.

“Maaan... Menou is just so darn cool...”

It had been a fairly long time since this Akari had gotten even a small amount of interaction with Menou. She'd missed her so much that she started crying despite herself. *I hope Menou didn't find that too suspicious...*, she worried.

This incident in Libelle was full of twists and turns. As long as Menou was safe, that was all right, but these uncertain events might have an effect on the future.

Looking out the window, Akari peered at the island.

“Well, I don't really care that Momo is bedridden 'cause of poison, but... What was all that about anyway?”

Was the distribution of that unfamiliar substance Manon Libelle called “monstrine” the source of all this strangeness? Akari heaved a sigh, frustrated that things had ended before she got to the bottom of any of it.

Then, suddenly, Libelle Island exploded.

“Huh?” Akari was struck speechless by the sudden, seemingly impossible sight.

Seconds after she witnessed this insanity, there was a thunderous roar and a

massive tremor that rocked the ground and Akari with it.

Libelle Island had been destroyed by a bizarre, elongated giant monster. Its head was smooth and flat like a fish, but most of the rest of its body was a frightful mess of strange tubes. It was so massive that Akari couldn't see its entire frame even from the window of the church, which overlooked the island.

An indescribably massive monster had broken through the center of the small island, breaking it into clods of earth.

As the monster appeared, it sent huge rocks and clouds of dust flying everywhere, tremors shaking the earth. The slightest movement of the summoned monster created waves in the ocean, flipping over ships that were moored in the harbor.

If the remnants of the pseudo-church Menou had created hadn't dulled the momentum of the waves and bounced back the fragments of the island, the city of Libelle would have undoubtedly taken massive damage.

Even then, it wasn't enough to prevent any harm entirely.

Boulders rained down on the harbor.

These were the remains of an island, even if it was a small one. The impact created more tremors, and several houses collapsed in Akari's range of vision alone.

Her mind had gone blank. What had just happened? She didn't understand.

"What is that...?"

This was far too different from anything that had ever happened before. Even Akari had never seen an island blown to pieces. There had been other occasions when things happened that Akari wasn't familiar with, but this was on far too large a scale.

But she quickly came back to her senses.

Menou had been in Libelle Castle. And now it had been destroyed without a trace.

"Menou is—"

“You can’t.”

She was about to go investigate whether Menou was safe when someone spoke to her.

Akari froze and turned to see a little girl with elegant features and a simple white dress. She entered Akari’s room, looking completely unfazed by the sudden events.

“You can’t go. If you go over there, it won’t be any fun at all. Why don’t you play with me here instead?”

Akari’s eyes snapped wide open. She raised her hand in the shape of a gun, Guiding Light surrounding her index finger.

It was her instincts, not logic, that were screaming a warning.



It's her.

She was the fuel of the violence that Manon Libelle would never have been able to commit on her own. She was the appearance of the monster that blew up an entire island. All of the unthinkably large-scale taboos that were occurring in this city—and the girl in front of her was the source of it all.

“Who are you? ...No, wait. *What* are you?”

“Mm? Maybe I should introduce myself.”

The girl's lips pouted, and her eyes flared with red light. Realizing she was going to use a conjuring, Akari unleashed the Guiding Light on her fingertip as well.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [I've got two oddities in my pocket.]

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

Both of Pandæmonium's arms melted away.

At the same time, she was struck by the Guiding Light that fired from Akari's finger. The girl was frozen in time, unable to move a hair. She had been about to use some kind of conjuring, but Akari assumed she was incapacitated now and lowered her finger.

Pandæmonium was a completely unknown being to Akari. They had never met before...which was why she was caught by surprise when two twisted arms popped out of her skirt pocket.

“Huh?!” Akari's exclamation of surprise was cut off when both arms wrapped around her throat.

Pandæmonium had used her arms as a sacrifice to summon two demon arms instead. The unlikely pair of arms that had emerged from Akari's pocket tightened their hold around her neck.

“Nn...gh...”

Tears welled up in her eyes from the force around her throat as she gasped

for oxygen.

The arms lifting Akari off the ground had several mouths. They moved their lips and perfect teeth in unison, speaking in the voice of the girl.

“Do you understand now, I hope? I’m *Evil*.”

The voice sounded far away to Akari’s ears. Her vision was growing hazy. This wasn’t good. Akari forced herself to stay conscious and sent Guiding Light to her fingertip.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Fracture]

The arms were ripped away by fractures in the fabric of space-time.

Losing her support, Akari dropped to the floor, too.

She was freed from the twisted arms, but to use other conjurings, Akari had been forced to release the *Suspension* on Pandæmonium. The torn-up arms landed palm-first on the floor and nimbly used their fingers to walk over to her. Then they hopped into the air and attached to the shoulders of the girl who was now unfrozen in time.

It was so grotesque as to be almost comical. Akari put a hand to her injured neck and coughed repeatedly.

This introduction had revealed the girl’s identity more than any explanation could.

A Human Error: the final form of an Otherworlder.

“*Evil*, you said? I don’t know how you showed up, but why are you getting in my way?”

“Oh? Well, if you went over there, you’d ruin all the fun. That’d mess up the whole point of the movie, don’t you think?”

Why was this girl talking about movies? Akari frowned. But if the cause of the irregularities was right in front of her, then that made things simple.

“If you’re the one who called that thing, then all I have to do is beat you.”

If she defeated this being, everything would be put back on course. There

would be no more unexpected developments.

Pandæmonium widened her eyes in an overdramatic show of shock.

“Mm! Mm-mm-mm! Beat me? You really think *you* can do that somehow?” Pandæmonium giggled and spread her arms open, inviting Akari to attack. “I know I’m weak, but you’re even weaker! Don’t you even know that, you silly *Time* person? You’re just a lost one who doesn’t know aaanything. Let’s get started, shall we? We’ll have our own fun little battle right here!”

Menou and Akari.

As each of them stood in separate places, they were confronted by the exact same little girl.

Their eyes locked for a moment in midair.

Menou was exchanging looks with a massive eye so large that it felt like it could swallow her whole. The enormous eyeball shifted, tracing Menou’s parabolic arc through the air.

She could clearly see herself reflected in the crystalline lens of the eye. The monster’s eyeball alone was bigger than Menou was tall. The sense of unreality made Menou’s head spin.

Then the monster’s eyeball blinked.

Menou came back to her senses as if released from sleep paralysis.

The creature that had burst out from the island was a dreadnought-class monster so enormous it seemed like nothing but a wall from up close. The shock waves from its emergence had sent Menou and Ashuna flying. The giant eyeball following Menou was one of several on its bizarre body.

Even as she sailed through the air, Menou searched for Ashuna.

If she hit the ground from here, she could land unharmed with the help of Guiding Enhancement and the proper posture, but it would be far more difficult if she fell into the ocean. With the wild waves thrashing as they were, she could easily get pulled under by the current and drown. This went for both of them.

As she spun, she caught a flash of golden hair. She lost sight of it again in an instant, but one glimpse of her location was all Menou needed.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

Forming thread out of Guiding Force, Menou threw it to Ashuna.

“Your Highness!”

“Got it!”

Sensing her plan immediately, Ashuna caught the dagger and yanked on it to pull Menou in. The two of them practically crashed into each other. Ashuna caught Menou in her arms and surrounded herself with the light of Guiding Enhancement.

The pair had already hit the top of their parabolic arc and begun their descent. Leaving Ashuna to take care of the landing, Menou charged her dagger with power again in a flash.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

The gust of wind from the dagger slowed the speed of their descent.

Menou’s crest conjuring wasn’t strong enough to make both of them float. For the time being, they glided through the air, aiming for solid ground.

Once they landed, Menou steadied herself and looked up at the massive monster.

It was so enormous, her breath caught.

She supposed she could understand that the enemy had broken her pseudo-church barrier. This was one of the legendary Human Errors, after all. Their strength was simply on another level. It might be possible for her to break even a barrier using the earthen vein with sheer brute strength.

However, she could never have begun to imagine that her opponent would destroy the entire island in order to break out of the pseudo-church.

The giant monster that had ripped through Menou’s barrier and physically crushed an entire island just by coming into existence split open—no, it had opened its mouth, so massive that it looked like it had split in two. The monster’s maw made up more than half of its body, so opening it gave the illusion that its body was breaking in half.

The towering beast twisted back and forth.

Pandæmonium jumped down from atop its head, which was so far up, one would have to crane to look at it. Spinning elegantly through the air, she landed on her feet. Without any Guiding Enhancement, the little girl's slender legs couldn't handle the impact; her lower body was crushed, and the resultant momentum sent her head smashing into the ground, where it splattered like a tomato.

Even Ashuna had to stare in shock at such a strange and nonsensical suicide, but it meant nothing at all.

"Peekaboo!" Pandæmonium came flying out of her own pulpy corpse like a grotesque jack-in-the-box.

Her face stiffening, Ashuna took a defensive stance. The girl responded to her stare by twirling around in a little dance, spinning and posing as if to show herself off.

Witnessing Pandæmonium's immortality for the first time, Ashuna grimaced.

"Ah-ha-ha, did I getcha?"

"I see... So this is a Human Error. I've never seen one in person before, but they're certainly animals."

"Mm, that's mean. You would call a weak little girl like me an animal? Excuse you! I'm a very cute monster!"

Pandæmonium, who had died for the sole purpose of surprising Ashuna, smiled brightly.

"So what's this about 'strengthening the barrier'?"

Her cruel yet childlike voice rattled Menou's eardrums.

"This one got super, super strong by devouring its own kind for aaages. It's a liiiittle different from the newborns you fought before."

The shock waves from the giant monster's appearance were still reverberating. Pandæmonium twirled to the background music of the raging waves and the screams in the city.

The monsters Menou had just barely managed to deal with earlier were only “newborns.”

“We had nothing but time, after all. In the white fog, it was just an endless, poisonous loneliness.”

That monster was the sole survivor of the thousand-year struggle among monsters, the one that had devoured the southern islands that were sealed in the *Ivory* fog with Pandæmonium.

And now, it had set its sights on the city of Libelle. This monster was too large to even take notice of individuals like Menou and Ashuna. With just one bite, it could destroy half the city and put a permanent dent in the continent. That was the scale of this horrific foe.

“So...what do we do?” Ashuna looked at Menou.

The giant monster was one thing, but its summoner, Pandæmonium, was now defenseless. By all appearances, at least, she looked as if she could be easily taken down with a tackle. The girl seemed prepared to be captured at any moment.

In reality, hurting Pandæmonium would be simple. From their short battle, Menou knew that Pandæmonium had no strategies for battle. The monsters she produced, too, generally just lashed out with no sense of intelligence. They seemed to be under Pandæmonium’s command, but she didn’t issue any sort of orders to them. In theory, she had plenty of weaknesses.

But what was the point?

She was capable of summoning herself by sacrificing her own dead body. In essence, that meant she could technically summon infinite monsters, too.

They couldn’t kill her, had no way to seal her, and she would never run out of resources.

Truly, she had the power to exterminate humanity and destroy the entire world.

Menou took a deep breath. “We don’t need to do anything.”

“What?”

As Ashuna stared at Menou in confusion, the giant monster that had grown up sealed in the horrific fog lunged forward to take a bite out of the continent.

Menou didn't move. It wasn't that she couldn't—she simply predicted there was no need to do anything about the monster.

Her suspicion was right.

A fog appeared.

It billowed out from empty space and coiled around the monster, clinging to it heavily and limiting its movements. Shockingly enough, there were the cracking sounds of the massive monster caving in under the pressure of the fog.

Covering the monster completely, it flowed from the sea to the land, reaching the place where Menou and company stood.

"Mm! I guess I can't bring any friends out of there yet after all. This one is weak, but still one of my favorites... I guess it'll take a while before the fog connects all the way here."

Looking at everything Pandæmonium had said thus far, Menou's thoughts connected to something else.

Just as she thought, the girl in front of them wasn't their biggest problem.

"Pandæmonium."

"What is it, lady?"

"You're not the real one, are you?"

Menou's sudden statement made Pandæmonium pause for the first time.

She blinked a few times, then finally sighed.

"...Mm." She smiled sweetly. "What gave it away, I wonder?"

"I knew it."

Menou had vaguely suspected for a while now. The monsters that Pandæmonium summoned were far from strong.

And the fog that surrounded the monster cemented her theory.

"If your monster that's existed for a thousand years is still trapped by the fog,

there's no way you could have escaped the fog completely. It's like you said—even you yourself are a 'newborn' Pandæmonium, aren't you?"

The girl had said she summoned that giant monster out of the fog. If the barrier had really weakened enough for Pandæmonium herself to escape, then there was no way it should still be able to hold a monster that served her.

In other words, the girl in front of her was just an offshoot cut from the real Pandæmonium, who was still sealed in the fog.

"The real you is in the fog. I'm sure you were testing it just now, too, but...the monsters in the fog are attached to the real Pandæmonium in the end. This version of you can't control them."

"Mm-hmm! I'm just a hand puppet, after all. I just barely managed to get my pinky finger out."

Her pinky finger.

This girl who had summoned massive amounts of monsters and destroyed an entire island was just a tiny fraction of a whole. Menou was inwardly horrified by the girl's words, all the more so since it was likely the truth.

"She's like a lighthouse I can connect to for just a moment, but...it looks like the fog ends up coming along and sealing me. Right now, it's like a one-use-only jack-in-the-box. The fog makes everything useless, even me."

The fact that the real Pandæmonium was sealed within the fog was good news.

She was still unable to free the swarms of monsters that were sealed in it. That was why she had produced this small offshoot of herself and tried to form a new army of monsters in Libelle.

The fog that was flowing from the monster above the ocean was clearly aiming toward Pandæmonium. Thin at first, it grew thicker and thicker, flowing around the girl and attempting to cover her.

"Now that it's caught in the fog, this body is useless, too. And since you've figured out my trick, let's move on to the climax!"

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon

[Gimme lotsa legs.]

The girl's lower body swelled.

Her lower half was offered up as a sacrifice and changed form. Both legs fused together, then grew larger. This was no small-time summon like the ones she'd done so far. Pandæmonium was pouring all the sacrifices she'd been given in Libelle into this summon to remake her own body.

Soon, she was big enough to break through the fog and look down over the city.

"This is the last of my classic moves! You gotta use all your strength to turn super-big!"

The remade Pandæmonium skittered along the ground. She still had the upper body of a little girl, but from the waist down, she had transformed into a giant centipede. However, instead of insect legs, the monster was moving with human limbs.

With her new centipede body, Pandæmonium grinned and scuttled toward Menou and Ashuna.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Acceleration]

Akari's arm struck Pandæmonium's body.

Her opponent had conquered *Suspension* the first time. So instead, Akari used *Acceleration* on herself and moved faster than the eye could see to break Pandæmonium's limbs.

But it was to no avail.

Despite her bones being broken in all four limbs, the girl showed no signs of pain. Her body fell to the floor, melted away, and disappeared, and a new girl blocked the door in her place.

"Not too bad. So what's next?"

Akari almost cursed aloud.

There seemed to be no point in trying to capture or harm her. Yet, she didn't

appear interested in attacking Akari, either. She faced Akari's attacks head-on, and if she took serious damage, she just sacrificed her own body and summoned herself anew. Thus, the process repeated.

"You... What do you want?"

"Let's see. How about we say I wanted to talk to someone else from my homeland?"

"Not a chance," Akari responded instantly. As an Otherworlder herself, certain things were obvious to her.

The girl in front of her was undoubtedly a Human Error. She had gone past Akari's current state and destroyed herself long ago.

"You don't have any memories, do you? What could we possibly talk about?"

"Mm..." Pandæmonium giggled.

Each use of a Pure Concept eroded the user's soul. Of course, their mind tried to shield against this, but it wasn't a perfect defense. Just as Akari said, Pandæmonium had long since lost all her long-term memories. Any personality and recollections she seemed to have were just on the surface.

Pure Concepts wore down the soul and spirit mercilessly. This girl had already used up her memories a thousand years ago.

"That's true. But don't you think you're being awfully cold?" Pandæmonium peered into Akari's face, her hands folded behind her back. "All you seem to be worried about is that girl you travel with. You left everything behind to come here, didn't you? You're not from this world. Don't you ever think about Japan and—?"

"I don't need to." Akari interrupted in a dark voice. "I don't need that old world. Not that I remember much about it anyway. All I know is that there was nothing good about that place."

She remembered this feeling very clearly. There were some things that still stuck with her: People who mocked and gossiped about others. Words that beat down the spirit and put cracks in the heart. A group that tormented her soul.

“Is a world like that really worth anything?”

“Of course it is,” Pandæmonium answered instantly. “Who are you to judge what a world is worth? That’s so selfish. The world doesn’t exist for your sake. We exist for the sake of the world. Listen—do you know why I came here to see you?”

“It wasn’t because we’re from the same homeland?”

“Of course nooot!” Pandæmonium laughed, dismissing her own reason as a lie. “I just wanted to thank you, that’s all.”

“Thank me?”

“Sure. It’s thanks to you that I was able to get out of the fog, you know? So I wanted to say thanks. I even summoned that really big one just so you would be alone.”

She hadn’t just summoned the giant monster to fight against Menou and Ashuna.

She’d destroyed an entire island just to keep Menou and Akari apart.

The little girl bowed her head toward Akari. “Thank you. It’s all because of you that I was able to get this little taste of freedom.”

“Because of me...?”

Akari didn’t understand. She had never seen Pandæmonium before and had certainly never done anything for her. Not once, even in all the many timelines she’d lived through.

“Mm! So you didn’t know. You’ve got no idea how your *Regression* works, or even where our Pure Concepts come from! You don’t know anything at all!” Pandæmonium beamed and spread her arms wide in a dramatic gesture. “You turned it back, didn’t you? This whole world, over and over and ooover again. You’re the *Time* person, the one who keeps regressing the world, right? I heard it in the fog. The sound of you rewinding time over and over, grinding the world back.”

This Human Error, who’d been sealed away for a thousand years, knew exactly what Akari had done. She was the one who’d told Manon about Akari’s

deeds.

“So the fog creaked, too.”

The distortion had put enormous pressure on the white fog, which kept out even the flow of time. And because of that, the difference in time between the fog and the outside world became a bigger and bigger burden, causing the fog to crack. It was three weeks ago, before Menou came to this town. The fact that Pandæmonium was freed and met Manon in that time was far from a coincidence.

It was the same moment when Akari was summoned into this world. More specifically, it was the exact time that she had used *World Regression*.

“Did you really think the strange things happening in this town had nothing to do with you? Don’t be silly. It’s all, aaaall your fault!”

Pandæmonium held out her hands.

“Since you’ve caused so many distortions in time, the everlasting white distorted, too. Thanks to you, I was able to squeeze out just my pinky finger. That’s how I could come to this city. I’d like you to distort things even more, but, mm... I suppose that might not be possible.” The little girl tapped her temple. “You’ve lost an awful lot of your memories, haven’t you?”

She was absolutely right.

Akari was well aware that her own memories were fading. It was the vaguest memories that disappeared first. By now, she’d forgotten the majority of her most recent memories of school, too. And once her memories from Japan were all gone, it was likely the ones in this world that would fade next.

The Akari who was normally with Menou wasn’t aware of her own memory loss. It’s difficult to be conscious of something you don’t know you’ve lost, after all.

But this Akari understood the bigger problem with that loss.

“If you want to live, you probably shouldn’t use your Pure Concept anymore. You’ve lost your memories so much that your personality is totally different from the way you were in Japan. Isn’t that right?”

It was true: Akari's current personality was a far cry from the person she had been in Japan. Of course, her time with Menou was a major contributing factor.

But even more so, it was the loss of her memories from Japan that had influenced her personality change the most.

For the current Akari, the time she spent with Menou made up far more of her memories than her time in Japan. The version of herself from Japan was being worn down to nothing, changing her into the Akari of this world.

"So what?"

But she didn't care.

Akari had no attachment to the memories she was losing. It truly didn't bother her if the sixteen years she spent in Japan disappeared completely.

After all, Akari had gained something in this world that she never had in her old one.

"I've got a dear friend here who I can trust with my life."

Akari pointed her finger at the smiling Pandæmonium.

"A friend so important that as long as I remember her, I don't care if I lose my other memories."

Her fingers were clenched except for her thumb and index finger, forming the shape of a gun. She aimed it directly at Pandæmonium, and there was a flash of Guiding Light.

Just like that, another memory vanished.

This one had taken place in a classroom at her school in Japan.

She went to an all-girls school, so they were all wearing the same uniform. Sometimes, when she saw dozens of people all in the same outfit as herself, she felt strangely out of place.

When she walked into the classroom, everyone froze and looked straight at her.

The room went cold.

Her classmates' gazes turned harsh and pierced into her, as if they were all

looking at something unpleasant from a distance, then changed to pretending not to see her at all. In a room full of people, Akari was constantly made to feel alone.

She had no friends. Even someone she thought might be her friend quickly stopped being one.

Just before homeroom started, she went to sit down at her desk and noticed something.

It was decorated with flowers.

A cheap white vase sat on her desk, likely purchased from a hundred-yen store, but filled with what looked like an incredibly expensive funeral arrangement.

It was an old-fashioned jab, but it hurt her more than expected.

She thought it was stupid, but she couldn't laugh.

Despite herself, she cast a blank-faced look around the classroom.

One of them looked away. One seemed uncomfortable. One continued pretending not to see her. And one of them laughed.

She had just forgotten another one of the girls' faces.

"Don't get in my way. I can still die in this world. I won't turn out like you."

Akari would never become a Human Error...because there was one girl she had met in this world whom she knew she would never forget.

"As long as Menou kills me, I'm fine with that."

Her best friend was going to kill her. And by killing her, her best friend would live.

Akari believed that firmly, and so she didn't hesitate.

"You don't mind if she kills you? What a beautiful friendship."

Pandæmonium's smile didn't waver in the face of the index finger filled with the power of a Pure Concept pointing right at her.

"Why don't you just turn it back, then? Until your memories run out. You can

just keep repeating it, you know? Until your whole personality is gone. The more you repeat it, the more the white fog will bend. You'll do for me what I can't do myself. It's just like that girl said—you're stirring up this stagnated old world. I'm sure you were called to this planet for that very purpose."

Akari bit her lip.

All she wanted was to save Menou. But by turning back time over and over for that purpose, she had brought out this monster. If *Regression* would cause such a monster to be unleashed, then she might bring the world closer to destruction every time she turned back time.

But if Menou was going to die, then she wouldn't hesitate to use it again.

Menou was already at the heart of all Akari's memories.

"That'd be a real shame, though. You don't even know that you're in a dead end. You really believe there's a chance at salvation? Unlike that girl who worked so hard in this town, you've been taboo from the very beginning, so there's nothing in the world that can change you!"

"Yes, there is. There has to be! That's what this power is for!"

"No. You don't stand a chance. You'll never be able to get the future you want. You can't save anyone else, silly. You can't even change yourself." Pandæmonium coolly rejected her. "The Pure Concepts in our bodies aren't for our benefit at all. This planet doesn't gift them to us for the sake of one person."

Pandæmonium was giving her advice now, as her predecessor who had fallen a thousand years before. "Don't you know that *World Regression* doesn't mean anything to the people who can connect to the planet's memories?"

"The planet's memories?"

"That's right. The memories of this planet. Guiding Force. The origin of the 'Lord' who's written about in the priestesses' scriptures. I'm pretty sure I hated that most of all." The girl pouted cutely. "As long as that exists, you'll never be able to get ahead, even with a Pure Concept. Think reeeal hard about it, *Time* person. Have the times you've repeated ever been exactly the same as you remember?"

Akari's finger trembled.

Pandæmonium's observation was dead-on. Every time she *Regressed* time, things were always slightly different. This incident was the biggest change, but the terrorist attack on the train in Grisarika Kingdom had been an unexpected event to Akari, too.

"It's no coincidence that you keep failing. Someone's targeting you, don't you see? That's why you failed over and over. How many times have you repeated things without even realizing that much? This world is never going to go the way you want. Someone else is getting in your way, that's why."

The first person who came to mind was the red-haired priestess.

That tall woman who threw back her head when she laughed, who was the very incarnation of ruin and destruction.

Noticing that Akari seemed to have someone in mind, Pandæmonium deepened her smile.

"So listen, I'll tell you something really interesting." The little girl leaned in conspiratorially. "They call us the Four Major Human Errors, but the truth is, there were five of us who tried to destroy the world: *Dragon, Star, Vessel, Evil...* and *Ivory*. We five tried to fight against the times."

This girl must have had a name before she became a Human Error. She spoke about herself from the time when she still had a name. "I think we worked really hard together. We thought there was nothing the five of us couldn't do! At least, I feel like that might've been the case."

The ancient civilization had heavily relied on the powers of Otherworlders. They were able to make use of Pure Concepts in a stable way. There were some drawbacks, but still, they managed to live alongside Otherworlders without them going wild.

But there was one reason those Otherworlders still rebelled in this world.

"It exists. A way home."

They wanted to go back to their own world.

All they wanted was to return home, no matter the cost. They were desperate

to return to their families, their friends, the lives that they had left behind in Japan.

The legendary Otherworlders who were known now as the Four Major Human Errors.

They were simply Japanese people who had tried to rebel against this world and go back to their home and failed.

But that didn't concern Akari at all.

"Well, I'm not going back."

She wasn't like them.

The only world she wanted to live in was this one.

"Menou is in this world, not any other. So there's no reason for me to go back to Japan."

"Mm-mm." Pandæmonium giggled. She formed a rectangle with her thumbs and index fingers and looked at Akari through the makeshift frame. "It's wonderful. The kind of beautiful friendship that's so interesting you'd want to watch it on the big screen! I think that last line would be perfect for the trailer."

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Fly through the sky.]

The girl's arms transformed up to the shoulder blades, turning into winged demon arms that attached to her back. Pandæmonium spread her twisted, enormous black wings, shuddering the air with each flap.

"See ya! I always leave as soon as the movie is over, myself, so I'm out of here. Feel free to enjoy the end credits, okay?"

"...I think it's rude not to stay seated until the lights go up, you know."

"Mm?" She looked puzzled for a moment, then shrieked with laughter.

It was the kind of laugh that would suit the little girl she appeared to be.

"Ah-ha-ha! Good one! You might have a point! Yeah, it must be really nice to be able to talk to people!"

Once her laughter faded, Pandæmonium took off into the sky.

Her business here was finished. She had sowed the evil seeds of doubt in Akari's heart. It was clear from the way Akari watched the girl fly away until she was out of view, her gaze wavering with uncertainty.

Akari's firm belief in *Time Regression* had been shaken to its foundations by Pandæmonium's words.

The fog spread as far as the eye could see.

It was heavy and oppressive, filling one's vision with whiteness. Just one small portion of the fog barrier that had sealed Pandæmonium for a thousand years had leaked out with the appearance of the giant monster.

As it flowed from the monster down to the ocean, the fog seeped toward land—toward its target. For Menou and Ashuna, it was just a hindrance to their vision, but for Pandæmonium, it held an obvious weight as it wrapped around her.

Most likely, Pandæmonium would soon be bound by the fog and rendered immobile, even if they didn't do anything. She seemed to have accepted that and was using up all the power she had left to fight before it caught her completely.

The lower body of a centipede crept toward Menou and Ashuna.

Pandæmonium's lower half had transformed into a giant insect as wide as a full-grown man. Instead of centipede legs, it had the limbs of humans. And where there should have been an insect's head, there was Pandæmonium's upper body, still shaped like a little girl.

The centipede body coiled around the two young women, trying to crush them.

"Don't underestimate me, Pandæmonium."

Guiding Force: Connect—Royal Sword, Crest—Double Invoke [Slash: Expansion, Flameburst]

Ashuna's sword produced a massive blade of flame.

It cut through the surrounding fog, spraying out red sparks.

"You've got some nerve to challenge me to a match of brute force!"

The fiery blade struck the centipede's giant body.

There was a roar loud enough to tear through eardrums. The result was instantaneous: Pandæmonium's centipede body was violently torn apart. Bits of it flew everywhere, spraying out body fluids.

But the girl's upper half didn't seem concerned about her destroyed body.

"There's more where that came from!"

The centipede was horrifically tough. Every one of the cut-off segments of its body was still living. They crawled along the ground with human limbs, charging toward Ashuna from all sides.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

A barrier formed by a scripture conjuring pushed back the charging centipede fragments.

Pandæmonium widened her eyes. Menou must have used up all her Guiding Force with all those scripture conjurings from before. She shouldn't be able to invoke any more—and then the girl realized what had happened.

When she linked with the earthen vein, power had flowed into her body and restored her Guiding Force. Her physical and mental exhaustion must be deeper than ever, but her power was practically at its peak.

"Mm. What a strange body you have."

"Not as strange as yours."

As the barrier of light vanished, Menou cut through the fog and leaped into the air. Her movements were so nimble that they scarcely moved the fog.

Pandæmonium didn't miss a beat.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Peekaboo. Guess who's behind yooou.]

The scattered centipede pieces turned into black shadows. They gathered together into a sharp black spear, flying straight for Menou's back.

Even if she accelerated with *Gale*, the shadow would still follow her and catch

up. None of Menou's moves that Pandæmonium had seen would be enough to escape this attack. The shadow spear pierced perfectly through Menou's body in midair—or so it appeared.

But then Menou vanished like a mirage.

The black shadow flew straight through her afterimage, knocking aside the dagger at the center of her hazy outline.

"Mm?" Pandæmonium followed the arc of the spinning dagger with curious eyes.

She hadn't used any crest conjuring. The dagger wasn't a Guiding vessel capable of producing illusions, either. And yet, something had created a detailed image out of Guiding Light with the dagger at the center.

Guiding Camouflage.

It was an application of Guiding Enhancement, so there was no indication when it was invoked. Just as Ashuna had been fooled at the evening ball, Pandæmonium had been misled about Menou's position.

"Tricky move, isn't it?" Ashuna grinned. Behind her was Menou, standing perfectly still. Even in a state of rest, producing her own image by way of Guiding Thread required a great deal of concentration.

But there was no need to produce the image any longer.

There was nothing left protecting Pandæmonium.

Menou began to construct a conjuring, sending Guiding Light flowing through the scripture clutched under her arm.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

The solemn tolling of the bell bore down on Pandæmonium from directly above her. With each peal, the black shadow broke into smaller and smaller pieces, and the lower body of the centipede began to crumble. The conjuring mercilessly rent all the inhuman parts with its sound, until all that was left was the upper body of a little girl.

"Mm-mm... I guess this really is the end now." Pandæmonium's body began

to melt away. She had used up all the life force sacrificed to her.

“Let me ask one last question.” Menou maintained the bell and kept her distance as she spoke. “What was your goal in tempting Manon and causing all this madness in Libelle? Revenge on the world that sealed you away? Or are you plotting to escape with your real body?”

“Mm, wrong on both counts. I do have my likes and dislikes, but I don’t reeeally hold a grudge against anyone, you know?” As her body fell apart, the girl’s tone was still as light and amused as ever. “You still don’t understand, do you? I don’t have a goal—I just wanted to enjoy the process. I’m starring in a monster movie today, remember? There are lots of different outcomes, even the ones where I lose. I like happy endings like this, too. I mean, I’d prefer it if at least one person died, but that’s just my personal preference, so it doesn’t really matter.”

By turning herself from a weak little girl into a monster with a giant centipede’s lower body, Pandæmonium had lost her ability to use her own death to summon herself back to life. Since more than half of her body was no longer her original self, this death didn’t count as hers. She had deliberately cast aside her own makeshift immortality and chose to turn herself into a giant monster instead.

After all, this Pandæmonium only amounted to a single pinky finger, so it was no major loss. Since calling a monster out of Pandemonium, where her real self was still trapped, had summoned the fog barrier as well, she had evidently decided that it would be more fun to use up all her power at once in this battle.

For Pandæmonium, combat in this world was nothing more than entertainment. She made her decisions based not on benefit, but on which option would be the most fun.

Which is why it was so difficult for Menou to understand.

“Then why? If you don’t have a goal, then I don’t see how throwing the world into chaos would be entertaining for you. How can you possibly find things like today fun when you don’t even have memories or a personality left?!”

“Because I’m *Evil*.”

As she dissolved into a pile of flesh, the girl responded without any hesitation.

“I’m the root of all *Evil* in this world.”

Were those really the words of a human?

“I bring chaos to this world. I bring carnage to this planet. I interfere with anything good, all in accordance with the Pure Concept that’s attached to this body.”

The inhuman conviction she spoke of was far more disturbing than the sight of her rapidly decomposing body.

It was far beyond Menou’s insistence that she herself was a villain. This was a Human Error, born of a Pure Concept that attached to a young spirit and was used far beyond the limit. The *Evil* that colluded with her body was speaking of its own unwritten rules.

“I am *Evil*. And *Evil* does not perish. I am the incarnation of the *Evil* that runs rampant in the hearts of every human born in this world.”

She was the ultimate outcome of an Otherworlder who had fused completely with their Pure Concept.

Her body, soul, and spirit had all been completely overtaken by the Pure Concept of *Evil*. It seemed as if she still had a personality, but in reality, that was long gone. Her memories had been used up completely, consumed by the countless years and uses of her powers.

This girl’s one and only role was to embody the concept of *Evil* that was born in this world.

“So I’ll let you in on a secret, lady. You, who walk in the world alongside the not-yet-complete *Time*. You, who carry a tiny hint of *Ivory*—the one who went from being the last hope of us four to becoming our doom.”

The countless monsters that had scattered across the entire continent were all her offspring and a part of her very self at the same time. Most of the biggest monsters were sealed within the fog, but there were still more monsters and demons in the land than humanity could fully comprehend.

The *Evil* that was born of her thoughts and flesh still continued to attack and

kill humans throughout the world in the form of monsters and demons.

That was the true essence of wickedness.

Incidents like this one were only an extra little opportunity for Pandæmonium.

“The Sword of Salt that destroyed *Dragon*, the strongest of the Pure Concepts among the four of us! A mortal strike from the weapon *Ivory* wielded could destroy any old *Time*. Even the ever-present timeline would be turned to pure salt.”

“Why would you tell me such a thing?”

Even as she demanded this, Menou sensed instinctively that what the girl said was true.

After all, if it were true, that would strike Menou’s heart all the harder. And *Evil* knew exactly what words would pierce someone’s heart the most.

“Mm-mm, have you forgotten already? Because I’m *Evil*. When I see people being buddy-buddy, it’s only natural that I want to put a stop to such a good thing. Don’t forget that, okay?”

The girl with the cherubic smile desired chaos above all else.

“Now you know there’s a surefire way to kill that girl.”

Finally, the destruction of her body reached her face. Even as her facial features melted away and exposed her cheekbones, she never once stopped smiling.

“Looks like that’s about it...but I won’t disappear. Even if this me isn’t here anymore, it’s still unthinkable that I could ever really be gone.”

She let out one last innocent, cheerful, childlike laugh as she gave her parting words.

“I’m the *Evil* who gets into everyone’s hearts, even yours!”

Fitting of an *Evil* worse than any monster, demon, or human to the very end, Pandæmonium left behind a parting gift in Menou’s chest.

She had revealed a surefire method of killing Akari and severing their

relationship forever: the Sword of Salt.

As soon as this Pandæmonium died, the fog began to clear up. The monster that had destroyed the village was gone as well.

“I guess it’s the end for real this time.” Ashuna shook her head and put her sword away. “Honestly, there’s a lot I want to ask you, but...I’ll let it go just this once. I’m feeling rather tired myself, so I’ll be taking my leave. Say hello to Momo for me.”

Without further ado, the princess turned on her heel and left, looking magnificent as ever as she strode away with her blond hair swishing.

Left alone, Menou clenched her fist.

She had a destination now.

The Sword of Salt: a conjuring left behind by *Ivory*, who had sealed or destroyed all the Four Major Human Errors. Menou would use this sword, which could destroy any Pure Concept, to kill Akari.

Her destination now was the same as the last stop on the journey she’d taken as a child.

Menou closed her eyes. Somewhere along the way, it had become all too easy to picture Akari’s sunflower-like smile, blossoming in the darkness behind her eyelids.

That carefree smile always beamed brightly at Menou...

In her mind’s eye, she saw Akari’s smile overlap with the grin on Pandæmonium’s bloodstained face.

“If Akari is going to turn into something like that...”

Then it would be far better to kill her...with my own hands.

Amid the still-lingering fog, the future was too clouded to see for certain. But now, their journey had a destination.

The far west, where the Sword of Salt stood.

Though Menou didn’t speak her resolution aloud, her face was full of grim determination as she walked away, pushing through the fog.

Far to the south of the port city, above the ocean...

The fog was still deep, thick, and heavy as ever. In a realm full of pure white as far as the eye could see, Pandæmonium heaved a sigh as the improvised monster movie she'd been watching came to an end.

"Mm... I'm just so weak."

Pandæmonium could see and experience everything her finger puppet did. Of course, all the sinister conspiracies and chaos that had occurred in Libelle had been conveyed to the real her in the fog.

In the end, it resulted in one of her disappearing.

Pandæmonium gazed down at her right hand.

Her right pinky finger was gone. She had cut it off and sacrificed it in order to escape through the tiny hole in the fog, to create a finger puppet. Sacrifices made to invoke an Original Sin Conjuring were irreversible; the little finger she'd lost would never return to normal.

"That's fine, though."

To her, the sacrifice she'd made was no big deal.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Send [Come back now, let's go home.]

Her right arm melted away.

She had sacrificed her right arm to perform a summoning. The giant monster that had been called into Libelle returned beneath her feet.

Pandæmonium pressed the stump of her missing right arm against the monster.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Return [Because you belong to me.]

The monster shrank rapidly. Its enormous mass was compressed to an unbelievable degree, until the once-giant monster clung to the girl's arm, still living.

A body used as sacrifice, even just a part, would be lost forever and could

never regrow.

Which was why she just had to reattach something else instead.

Every one of the monsters in this world was a part of her, after all. The difference between her power and that of her finger puppet was nothing more than the amount of sacrifices they could offer up.

All of this world's monsters were born and flooded into the world when she first used her Pure Concept of *Evil* to open the door of Original Sin a thousand years ago. She was the lord of those countless monsters, the root of all things bad. All of the *Evil* that ran rampant in this world, be it monster or demon, was a part of her, and could be sacrificed as such.

As long as there were still monsters and demons in the world, the real Pandæmonium could never be destroyed. The finger puppet was the same way, too. The first monster that she summoned was the *Evil* finger puppet. It was only because she was killed after those had all been destroyed that the finger puppet melted away.

It would take some time before she adapted to her new right arm. She wouldn't be able to make a new finger puppet from that hand for a while.

Which was why she decided to enjoy the other one instead.

In the midst of the white fog, which had leaked out and grown just a little bit lighter, the little girl raised her left hand and grinned.

"The other me still seems to be doing pretty well."

One of the fingers of her left hand—the pinky finger—was missing.



A scattered consciousness was being reconstructed.

The soul had been diffused across the planet, flowing away without end. The spirit had lost its will and was beginning to melt away. These two elements could not be maintained without a body, but now, power forcibly gathered them back together and pulled the sinking life back to the surface.

It certainly wasn't pure, though. Something strange and sticky, pulled from farther below the planet's earthen vein, was adhering the three elements of life back together and giving them new form.

Just as they all connected, Manon Libelle's consciousness suddenly reawakened.

She opened her eyes and saw the moon looking down at her. The first emotion Manon felt as the pale moonlight shone on her was confusion.

"I'm...alive...?"

Where was she? Why was she alive when she thought she had died? Lying faceup on the ground, Manon blinked slowly a few times.

Just then, a face appeared above her, peering into her own.

"Good morning. I'm glad you're awake."

It was a young girl of around ten years old with black hair and refined features: none other than the Human Error known as Pandæmonium.

"Is this...hell?"

"Nope. It's reality."

Considering she had awoken to find Pandæmonium waiting for her, she wouldn't have been surprised to learn that she'd gone to hell, but evidently that wasn't the case.

"How are you feeling?"

“Absolutely horrid.” Manon put a hand to her mouth, holding back nausea. “I feel as if I was deceived by kind words only to have a dagger stabbed into my head, then got into a fight and ended up having parts of my body explode, and finally had three of my vital points stabbed. What in the world is going on?”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! That’s about right. The people I used as material for you died in pretty awful ways!”

As Pandæmonium held her sides and laughed, Manon sensed the reason she had awoken.

“Material...? Does that mean you brought me back to life?”

“Mm-hmm.” The little girl cheerfully confirmed the truth, as unbelievable as it sounded.

In this world, the definition of *life* meant that one had all three fundamental components: body, soul, and spirit. Pandæmonium’s Pure Concept of *Evil* was directly connected to these aspects of life.

But not in any normal form.

“You’d become about half demon, after all. Demons are fundamentally undead, so even if their bodies are destroyed, they don’t die. I had a monster swallow your body and bring your corpse here, then used the dead bodies I found here as a sacrifice to rebuild the parts that were missing. Now we’re in...I believe it’s called Grisarika Kingdom.”

The two of them were in the garden of an abandoned church in the royal capital of Grisarika Kingdom. It was the same place that Menou had used when she assassinated an Otherworlder three weeks earlier. Pandæmonium had used the corpses that were buried in the church’s garden to rebuild Manon’s body.

An ordinary human’s corpse wouldn’t be able to call back Manon’s consciousness. If she had only used the knights that were buried here, the spirit and soul would be too different from Manon and would likely have formed a demon instead.

But the body of an Otherworlder boy was buried here, too.

An Otherworlder with a Pure Concept still made excellent material for

conjuring, even when they were dead.

Pandæmonium stretched out her hand to the sky above, as if to grab the moon.

“Now that I’ve made it out, I want to cause far bigger chaos than just that little port city. Since I’m *Evil*, and you’ve still got human thought, can you use me to stir up chaos in this world?”

When Manon was offered power, the doubts she felt were slightly off the mark. Indeed, there was something she had wondered all along: Why did Pandæmonium lend her power at all?

When it came to the incident in Libelle, it could have simply been that Manon happened to be the first person she met. But why would Pandæmonium then go all the way to the neighboring Grisarika Kingdom and specifically revive Manon? She thought about it and came up with one possible connection.

Manon had an older sister, only half-related by blood.

The little girl that her lost lamb of a mother had given birth to and raised when she was in Japan.

They were only half sisters, but she was always told that her older sister in that other world was bright, cheerful, and energetic.

And most of all, it was because of her mother’s suggestion to her father that the Fourth had started trying to analyze and undo the seal of Pandemonium.

“I suppose even if your memories vanish and your personality is gone... perhaps something still remains.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just something that happened a long time ago... Yes, a thousand and ten years ago, to be precise.”

This theory of hers was ultimately nothing more than a guess. It was certainly nothing that a monstrosity who had lost all traces of memory and personality and even forgotten her own name could confirm or deny.

“Since you’re offering, I suppose I will borrow your power once again... That reminds me, I don’t believe I ever actually introduced myself to you. My name is

Manon.”

“Mm... Manon! Rhymes with *demon*! What a lovely name!”

“Thank you. My mother gave me this name, after all. If you could remember it, I’d be very happy.”

“All right. Good to work with you again, Manon. So would you mind telling me what I should do first?”

“Let me see...”

Grisarika Kingdom was their neighboring nation. Manon didn’t know that much about it. However, there had been one point of interest to her in the events set off by Orwell, which had also involved Menou.

It wasn’t the crime Orwell had engaged in. It was the terrorists who had run into Menou on the way to the ancient capital, Garm. The train hijackers were fellow members of the Fourth who had tried to attack Ashuna to demand the release of their leader in this nation.

And so Manon smiled and made a suggestion.

“Did you know? The person who was the Director of the Fourth when they were spread over the continent is being held right here in this nation.”

To bring more chaos to the world.

Pandæmonium and Manon exchanged gleeful smiles.

“Come in.”

After three brisk knocks, a voice gave her permission to enter.

“Excuse me.”

When Menou walked into the office, Pastor Sicilia was going over the damage reports from the recent events.

The victims of monstine, the destruction of Libelle Island, and the damage caused by the resultant shock waves. Each of them alone could be considered a major incident, but all three combined were even more severe. The overall losses to the port city Libelle were so overwhelming when laid out on paper that it made Menou’s head ache.

The only thing that could be construed as a positive was that the Fourth had been erased from Libelle. It certainly wasn't enough of a gain to cancel out all the resulting damage.

Instead of talking about any of that, however, Sicilia simply looked at the bag hanging at Menou's waist.

"Have you prepared for your departure?"

"Yes, thank you. I was able to get my pay without any difficulty, which I appreciate. I intend to resume my journey to the west, to use the Sword of Salt to assassinate Akari Tokitou."

The Pandæmonium incident was officially credited to Ashuna, who had been a major force in the battle. No doubt the fame of the Princess Knight would spread even wider after she defeated the monsters that suddenly appeared in Libelle.

"But we must still be cautious."

"Of course. After all, people don't have just one pinky finger."

There was a moment in their earlier battle when Pandæmonium split into two people. They were both the same person, of course, but at the same time, it was natural to assume they might be separate beings as well. Since Pandæmonium's revival was dependent on offering herself up as a sacrifice, it was strange that this second copy of her had appeared before the first one died.

The left pinky finger...and the right one.

Most likely, that was the identity of the two Pandæmoniums who appeared at the same time.

When the fog emerged, she had abandoned one of them, but the other finger could still be out there somewhere, plotting something. This was no time to let their guards down.

But over the course of the incident, Menou had also determined her next destination.

The Sword of Salt.

She would use the weapon that had once turned an entire continent into salt to assassinate the holder of the Pure Concept of *Time*. This plan had been solidified in her fight with Pandæmonium.

“I’ve spoken to Momo already. We can’t allow Akari to turn into something like that.”

“I see.”

Sicilia’s response bordered on curt. Truthfully, she was in an incredibly busy position at this moment. She most likely didn’t have any time to spare on Menou, who was leaving the city.

“Perhaps this is uncalled-for, but...you really are nothing like Flare.” They had only known each other for the length of one job in this city, so her advice was brief. “You should walk your own path. No matter what it might be.”

“I will. Thank you very much.”

Her report completed, Menou bowed and left the room, then met up with Akari.

Menou had renewed her resolve.

She would kill Akari herself. With her own hands on the blade. For the sake of none other than Akari herself.

And so Menou smiled at Akari.

“All right, let’s go.”

“Yeah!”

Menou and Akari walked away side by side.

There was some strangeness regarding Akari’s role in this incident, too. She claimed not to remember when she was kidnapped, nor when they got separated in the dance hall, nor when she started crying when Menou rescued her.

“...Akari. You really don’t have any idea why you can’t remember anything about what happened when you vanished from the dance hall?”

“I’m sorry, no... The next thing I knew, I was back at the church.”

“You don’t need to apologize...”

It was possible that she’d been put to sleep when she was kidnapped or something along those lines, but Akari had been aware when Menou came to her rescue. There was something very strange about the fact that she didn’t remember that moment, either.

Had Manon done something to her, or was there another reason? And if the latter, what could it be?

Akari looked genuinely apologetic, showing no signs of lying. As she looked at the usual Akari, an irrational thought suddenly occurred to Menou.

It was before they came to Libelle: There was an Otherworlder boy she met in Grisarika Kingdom. Once she determined he had a Pure Concept, Menou had killed him without hesitation and abandoned his body.

But when she first made contact with him, it had crossed her mind: If this boy really didn’t have a Pure Concept, then maybe she wouldn’t have to kill him, even though he was an Otherworlder.

So perhaps...

If there was a way to ensure that Akari would never kill anyone, cause any harm, or let her Pure Concept go wild...

If Menou could separate her from her role as an Otherworlder and see her from a simpler point of view...

“...” Menou shook her head, trying to disperse the thoughts that were bubbling up within her.

It’s fine.

That was not her role.

Because she wasn’t just a pure, proper, and powerful priestess. She had resolved as much in the footsteps of her Master, in the monastery where she and Momo were raised.

She would be a pure, proper, and powerful villain.

“Prepare yourself, Akari. This journey is only going to get harder from here on

out!”

“Aye-aye, sir! As long as you’re with me, it’ll be fine!”

Menou was so determined to carry out her role that she failed to notice something.

It wasn’t just Akari’s smile at her—the expression Menou wore in response to Akari’s bright smile was equally carefree.

As the two of them set out, Momo was elsewhere, looking in a mirror.

The face reflected back at her still didn’t quite look healthy. She was slightly pale and haggard. The exhaustion of recovering from the poison hadn’t worn off yet.

But Momo had no time to rest peacefully in Libelle. Menou had been worried about her health and told her she could rest for a while before catching up, but of course Momo intended to follow her right away.

“.....” Momo clutched her scrunchies tightly.

She had spoken to Menou yesterday before she left town. The disaster that occurred while Momo was bedridden was even more shocking than what happened in the ancient capital, Garm. But what caught Momo’s attention even more was the change in Menou herself.

Menou was clearly beginning to develop more feelings toward Akari than necessary. After witnessing Pandæmonium’s insanity, she seemed set on killing Akari more for her sake than anyone else’s.

That was a bad sign. Menou, Momo’s beloved superior, shouldn’t be motivated by such things.

“Darling...you’re too kind for your own good.”

By nature, Menou tended to do things for other people’s sakes. The reason she had declared herself to be a villain in the first place was for the sake of the other children in the monastery, influenced by the Master who had a strong effect on her at the time.

And if Menou became determined to act for the sake of someone who she was now getting to know...

At this rate, she would be killed by that Otherworlder girl. It wasn't that Akari would hurt Menou herself, but she would end up causing a situation that could lead to Menou's death.

A priestess who distanced herself from the Faust was always assumed to be committing a crime.

What would happen if an Executioner, who was meant to hunt taboo, was to do the same?

Then a certain terror that she didn't want to remember might emerge from the depths of the monastery where Executioners were raised.

"If my darling can't do it..."

Momo had already long since decided what to do if what she expected eventually came to pass.

"...then I'll kill her myself," she murmured quietly.

Deep in the monastery in the holy land, there was a single priestess.

She was tall, with dark-red hair. It was difficult to gauge her age; she looked like she could be anywhere between her late twenties and her fifties.

The priestess was looking at documents about the children enrolled in the monastery she supervised.

None of the current children were of much note. There were no children with incredible gifts of Guiding Light but unstable spirits, or mysteriously high grades despite their low abilities. They were all simply having their spirits crushed by the harsh training, their faith strengthened by the education drilled into them.

Everything was running smoothly, and therefore terribly boring.

She cast the documents aside, deciding that she could let the other Masters handle things here.

Then, suddenly, her scripture glowed.

Guiding Force: World Connect (Conditions Met)—Scripture, Third Charter—Invoke [Our world is beyond words.]

She hadn't done anything. The scripture had automatically constructed and

invoked a conjuring that connected to her spirit.

The necessary information flowed to her from the planet's memories.

As she witnessed the memories of a self she had never known from a different timeline, the priestess threw back her head and laughed loudly.

"Bah-ha-ha. So it's time at last, eh?" She stood up and prodded the cover of her scripture. "Come on, give me the details."

"Hello. What a lovely evening. You are looking beautiful, as always. I'm glad you seem as devoted to keeping yourself young as ever."

Still glowing with Guiding Light, the scripture put forth words.

It wasn't a communication conjuring by way of the scripture. The book itself was speaking aloud, with its own form of independent thoughts.

Since the priestess knew all the functions of the crests written in the scripture when they were activated, she was unsurprised. This feature was part of every scripture that was carried by members of the Faust who had passed through the rigorous training, and she also knew that it was part of the reason Orwell, who'd worked her way up to Archbishop, had fallen to the unthinkable.

"Spare me the small talk. Just answer me."

"Two of the Four Great Human Errors. We've detected that both Evil and Vessel have partially escaped. This warning information has only been released to the Elders, and those Faust who have had the seal released on the zero charter in their scripture."

"I see. Guess it was worth repeating things so many damn times. Not even a part of them has gotten out since the Starhusk hatched. I don't know what the Elders are going to do, but...if they fail as miserably as that old hag Orwell, that'll sow the seeds of displeasure, too."

Then, she seemed to remember something and sneered, her lips in the shape of a crescent moon.

"In addition, the Order has come. Please obey the orders of the Elder—Magician."

"Well, isn't that something...? Of all those phony Elders, it figures I'd get stuck

with the most useless one of all.”

She sighed and picked up the scripture in one hand.

“Wait a moment. Magician’s orders haven’t come in yet.”

“Oh, shut up, you piece of junk. As if I’m going to just do whatever that idiot says.”

“How rude. I am not a piece of junk.” The scripture paused for a moment. *“I am your beloved partner.”*

The red-haired priestess opened her mouth wide, threw back her head, and laughed.

“Wow. When you spoke up after so long, I wasn’t expecting you to make a joke. Makes you realize how much time has passed. Everything deteriorates eventually, doesn’t it?”

“This is an advancement, not a deterioration. More importantly, you cannot ignore your orders.”

“If I don’t have any orders yet, I’m allowed to make my own decisions first. Let’s go, piece of junk. We have much more important things to do than wait around for orders from some moron.”

“I see. Your logic is sound. So then, what will you do in your limited time until your orders arrive?”

“Oh, nothing major.” She bared her teeth in a disturbingly wide grin, speaking in a casual tone. “I’ll just kill my apprentice for the umpteenth time.”

Deep in the holy land controlled by the Faust...

The living legend who had hunted down more taboo entities than anyone else in history, Master Flarette, declared her next target for execution.





AFTERWORD

Author: “So I want to completely rewrite the second and third chapters of Volume 2. Is that all right?”

Editor: “But the deadline is in three days...”

This conversation once took place somewhere in Japan, but I’m doing perfectly well today. And Volume 2 came out safely on time... At least, I hope it did?

We decided on a very regular every-other-month release schedule, but when I think about it, I was definitely drinking when we made that decision. Getting me good and drunk before I commit to a schedule like that... Damn you, editor...!

Well, all jokes aside, I’ve only got two pages left for the afterword, so let’s move on to the thanks.

To my editor, Null:

I’m forever in your debt. Thank you for going along with this stubborn author who doesn’t want to make decisions about the worldbuilding, refuses to plan out the plot, and never knows the characters’ futures until they happen in the book. Every time we have a meeting, I’m reminded how hard an editor’s job must be.

To nilitsu:

Thank you for the wonderful illustrations. In addition to the four main characters, it was very exciting to see your amazing designs for the two new characters in this volume. I want to do more dress-up scenes like Akari in the priestess outfit and Menou in a dress...!

Finally, to the readers:

Thank you so much. I’ve gotten so many comments on Twitter and blogs, and sneaking a peek at them always puts a smile on my face. I hope you’ll continue to share your opinions on what you like best.

The release date for *The Executioner and Her Way of Life*, Vol. 3, has been set

for winter 2019. Plans for the comic adaptation are moving along, too, as well as Menou merchandise illustrated by the wonderful nilitsu.

Nothing would make me happier as an author than continuing to bring the ever-expanding world of Menou and company to you.

The world creaks and
groans, strained to the
limit by the *Regression*.
Pandæmonium weaves
her secret plan.

And after all this
time, Flare springs
into action—

The
Executioner 3
and Her Way of Life

COMING SOON

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink